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CHANGES IN A PARTICRATIE: THE BELGIAN PARTY SYSTEM FROM 1944 to 1986

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According to former Belgian prime minister Leo Tindemans, two months after he handed in the resignation of his fifth cabinet in 1978: '*Particratie* is that far advanced in Belgium that the sovereign power no longer comes from the nation but from party chairmen, and the cabinet has to fulfil what the party chairmen decide'.[1] Scholars (J. Meynaud, J. Ladrière, F. Perin, L. Huyse, J. Willequet, L. Rowies, L. Dewinter), keen observers of Belgian politics (such as former ministers M. Grégoire and P. Vermeylen, former MP L. Claes, journalists like M. Grammens and C. Rebuffat), polemicists (K. Van Isaker, R. Derine, R. Liefooghe) and decision-makers (such as party chairmen K. Van Miert and H. Schiltz, and former minister F. Perin) agree in characterising Belgian politics—whether exclusively or partially—as a *particratie*.[2] In so doing they place Belgian politics in line with the Italian *partitocrazia* from which the term was taken. According to most of these authors, the notion of *particratie*—involving a preponderant impact of political parties on political decision-making—is valid for the whole post-war period of Belgian politics, while even before World War II the same criticism arose, not least through King Leopold III's reproof of the impact of political parties.[3]

However, a first glance at the Belgian party system in the four decades after World War II does not appear to strengthen this thesis. How can the considerable fractionalization, for instance, be concomitant with a steady or even growing tendency towards party government? Could it be that the alleged *particratie* is merely or mainly a political argument used by frustrated politicians and activists? Indeed the notion of *particratie* is used in debate to castigate a particular policy (M. Grégoire, L. Claes), against the weakness of other institutions such as the cabinet (H. Schiltz, K. Van Miert), or against the failure of a particular strategy (L. Tindemans). Even as an argument, however, its prevalence as well as its importance necessitate a full investigation. If true, then indeed it touches the very core of Belgian politics.

The present study is an inquiry into the changes in the party system in Belgium from 1944 to 1986. Though the *particratie* thesis is present in the background, the core and bulk of this investigation is an analysis of the important changes that have occurred in Belgian political parties and party politics since World War II, whatever the direction or variance of such changes. Different levels of the functioning of parties are examined: how the parties compete, in what distribution and intensity they are present at the level of the electorate, the internal organization of the parties, partisan intervention in decision-making, and the intricate, interwoven relationship of parties to other social subsystems. Indeed, it is only through such a close and differentiated examination that the *particratie* thesis can be properly assessed. Yet, beginning with the question of party competition, or the party system in the strict sense, the changes which have occurred between the later 1940s and the early 1980s are so great that it is difficult to imagine *particratie* as a constant feature.

1. The political parties in competition

1.1 Introduction: the fractionalization of the party system

In 1950, at the culmination of the Royal Question (see below), only four political parties competed in the general election: the Christian CVP-PSC, the socialist BSP-PSB, the Liberal Party, and the communist KPB-PCB. The other small lists were reduced to a minimum of three. Three decades later, in 1981, fourteen parties were not only competing in elections, but were even represented in parliament (CVP, PSC, SP, PS, PVV, PRL, VU, FDF, RW, KPB-PCB, Agalev, Ecolo, Vlaams Blok and UDRT-RAD). In addition, there is a long series of small lists, some of which are small pressure parties. A considerable fractionalization of the Belgian party system has occurred.

At this point, it should be stressed that the electoral system does not have much to do with this fractionalization. Proportional representation does facilitate the entry of new parties.[4] But the electoral regulations for parliamentary elections have been kept almost constant since the end of World War II, except for the extension of suffrage to women and younger age groups. In 1948–9 the number of enfranchised people doubled (from 2,724,796 to 5,635,452) when women came to vote in the parliamentary and provincial elections (women had been enfranchised for the municipal elections in 1920). In 1981 the 18–21 age group was also enfranchised for the parliamentary elections. In

both cases the effect on the electoral outcome was rather small. The causes of the fractionalization have to be found elsewhere.

Moreover, the figures on fractionalization do not fully account for the considerable qualitative changes that came about. Party competition in Belgium over three decades changed in size and in outlook.

1.2 The dominant parties

Three political parties, properly called the 'traditional parties', have dominated the political scene in Belgium for more than a century. The oldest, founded in 1846, is the Liberal Party. In reaction to the success of the Liberal Party, the Catholic Party developed since 1863. (Party formation at that time occurs essentially within parliament; outside party organization being limited to electoral associations at the level of the *arrondissement*.) Both parties in the second half of the nineteenth century made for the development of a truly two-party system, at least until 1884, when the Catholic Party attained the majority it was to keep for an uninterrupted thirty years. World War I ended this period by a consociational extension of the cabinet to include the Liberals and the Socialists.

The Catholic Party held that majority position, in spite of the extension in 1893 of tax suffrage to a plural vote system, an extension which increased the number of enfranchised citizens from 137,000 to 1,370,000. This extension also gave a definite opportunity to the socialist Belgian Workers' Party, founded in 1885. The party became a significant parliamentary force, and soon the second largest party, bypassing the Liberal Party despite the introduction of proportional representation in 1899.

The introduction of universal suffrage for men in 1919 put the seal on Catholic electoral strength: it remained the largest party, with the Belgian Workers' Party coming second and the Liberal Party remaining very much the third party. But the Catholic Party lost its absolute majority. The classical coalition pattern in the inter-war period was a Catholic–Liberal combination, the Socialists only being allowed to join in a so-called 'national union' of Catholics, Liberals and Socialists.[5] In the inter-war period Flemish nationalists, Communists and the fascist Rex succeeded in entering parliament, attaining between them almost 25 per cent of the votes in 1936 and 18 per cent in 1939, but, at least until 1940, none of them was considered *regierungsfähig*.

After World War II, Catholics, Socialists and Liberals considered themselves, and were considered, as 'system parties': parties existing

throughout the whole period, having democratic legitimacy, with credible claims for participating in government. Almost exclusively, these three parties made and unmade the thirty-five cabinets in the period from 1944 to 1986. The Catholic Party is pivotal to the Belgian party system. Since 1884, and except for 1945–7 and 1954–8, the party has continually been a member of the cabinet, either alone or in coalition. For eighty-six of these hundred years, the prime minister was a member of the Catholic Party. By comparison, the Liberals had in the same period forty-seven years of participation in government (twenty-one in the inter-war period, eighteen after World War II, and eight during the two World Wars) while the Socialists had forty-two years of participation (in a reversed proportion: eleven in the inter-war period, twenty-three after World War II, and eight during both the World Wars). It should also be noted that both the Catholic Party and the Belgian Workers' Party underwent major organizational changes in 1945 (see below), illustrated in their new names of Christian People's Party (CVP-PSC, Christelijke Volkspartij—Parti Social Chrétien) and Belgian Socialist Party (BSP-PSB, Belgische Socialistische Partij—Parti Socialiste Belge) respectively. The Liberal Party reorganized in 1961 as the Party for Liberty and Progress (PVV-PLP, Partij voor Vrijheid en Vooruitgang—Parti de la Liberté et du Progrès).

1.3 New parties on the political scene

The fourth party on the Belgian political scene after World War II was the Belgian Communist Party (KPB-PCB, Kommunistische Partij van België—Parti Communiste Belge). Its situation in the party system at that time was peculiar, and in that sense new. In line with the leftist surge after the war, electoral support for the party in the first post-war elections in 1946 (elections which had been postponed partly in order to reduce Communist support) attained an unprecedentedly high level of 12.7 per cent, more than doubling their highest vote in the inter-war period (6.1 per cent in 1936). Moreover, with the return of the Belgian cabinet in exile—given the cooperation with Communist resistance fighters during the war—the Communists were immediately accepted as being eligible to participate in the cabinet. They first took part on 27 September 1944 and participated in five cabinets in all, albeit cabinets of short duration. Following the communist take-over in Eastern Europe, however, and ultimately the coup in Prague on 12 March 1948, the ban was re-established: 'Nous avons peur', as minister Spaak put it afterwards in the United Nations. The Communist Party again

was consided an anti-system party, a *Staatsopposition*[6] pursuing a fundamental overthrow of the system, a position which became more evident through the blockade of Berlin, the Korean War, and the bewildering trials in the People's Republics. While international communism regularly provided such political dramas as Hungary, Czechoslovakia or Poland, the Communist Party in Belgium became a small and marginal actor in the Belgian party system—its electoral support ranged from 2 per cent in 1958 to 4.6 per cent in 1965—even when, from the mid-1970s, it tried a timid Eurocommunism. Notwithstanding *ouvertures*, the Communist Party does not appeal to young leftist intellectuals, who have created new, still smaller and more radical parties. In 1985 the party, for the first time since 1925, failed to win even one parliamentary mandate, whether in the House or in the Senate.[7]

Let us now turn to the opposite end of the political spectrum. As a consequence of the fall of the Third Reich, the fascist party, Rex, founded in 1936, disappeared completely from the Belgian political scene. The Flemish nationalists, partly for the same reason—that is, the collaboration of a number of their leaders during the German occupation—and partly as a result of the severe repression of Flemish activists, as of the Flemish Movement as a whole, were banished from public life. A first attempt at a new party formation in 1949 failed. A new attempt in 1954 as Volksunie (VU, People's Union) enjoyed a limited success; the party really took off only from 1961 onwards. The Volksunie, typically, is a structural opposition party, advocating change of important structural factors within the political system (for instance, federalism), though without questioning the system as such.

In reaction to the success of this Flemish structural opposition party, and as a reaction also to changing Flemish or Dutch versus Walloon or French relations, two new structural opposition parties emerged: the Democratic Front of French-Speakers (FDF, Front Démocratique des Bruxellois Francophones) formed in Brussels in 1964, and the Walloon Gathering (RW, Rassemblement Wallon) in Wallonia during the period 1965–8. Both parties formed an alliance, albeit one which, from 1974 on, did not prevent one party entering government and the other remaining in opposition. After some years they even gently changed roles, in 1974–7 and 1977–81 respectively.

The breakthrough of the federalist parties arose from a long-term attempt at an oppositional movement—the Flemish Movement—which has persisted since 1840, and which already in 1919 led to the emergence of a political party, which clearly formed an anti-structural

opposition. The severe economic, social, cultural and political decline of Wallonia stimulated the formation of a proper interest-articulating party, the Rassemblement Wallon. The growing power of Flanders, hampering the classical dominance of the French-speaking *classe politica* in Belgium, and which was to be experienced most obviously in Brussels, in turn gave rise to a party for the French-speaking inhabitants of Brussels, the FDF. It should also be noted that the electorate in Brussels has long been far more volatile than those in Flanders and Wallonia, a fact that undoubtedly has helped the FDF.

The parallel between Flanders, on the one side, and the French-speaking community and Wallonia, on the other, in terms of the presence of a federalist party, is a major change in comparison to the inter-war period when only a Flemish nationalist party functioned. The parallel has provided a structural condition for the lifting of the ban on these parties participating in the cabinet.

Since the end of World War II numerous other attempts at party formation have been made. Among these, the most important were (in chronological order): a 'Labour'-ist Belgian Democratic Union in 1944–6, the Middle Class Party in 1954, the National Movement in 1958, the National Gathering and the Social Independent Party in 1961, the Communist Party (Maoist), the Flemish Front of Democrats and the Party of Independents in 1965, the Walloon Workers' Party in 1968, the Independent Liberals in 1971, the Feminist Party (VFP-PFU), the Party of German-speaking Belgians (PDB), the Maoist Amada in 1974 and the Trotskyist Revolutionary Workers' League (RAL-LRT) in 1977. Ecologist groupings (Agalev in Flanders and Ecolo in Wallonia) have competed also since 1977. In 1978 both a dissident Flemish nationalist and a rather Poujadist UDRT-RAD competed, each obtaining one seat in the House. Both repeated this relative success in 1981, with the UDRT-RAD even augmenting its number of representatives to four (one of whom is in the Senate). The Ecologists obtained a considerable success in 1981 with four representatives in the House and five in the Senate—a success they consolidated in 1985.

It is difficult to predict the future of the UDRT-RAD, the Vlaams Blok and the Agalev–Ecolo parties. Until 1977 only some of these small parties succeeded in entering parliament with at most two representatives and one senator. In Belgium the decisive test of the endurance of a party has been to survive two elections for parties with no MPs and three elections for parties which obtained at one election one or more seats in parliament. If we adopt the criterion of three

elections as fulfilled for Agalev, Ecolo, UDRT-RAD and the Vlaams Blok and look at the number of parties which won parliamentary representation, the following list can be suggested:

- in the elections of 1946, 1949 and 1950: four parties constantly in parliament
- in the elections of 1954, 1958, 1961 and 1965: five parties constantly in parliament
- in the elections of 1968, 1971, 1974 and 1977: nine parties constantly in parliament, from which six in pairs (having split, but sharing a common ideology or forming a cartel)
- in the elections of 1978, 1979 and 1985: twelve parties constantly in parliament, all but two of which have ties with one another (through a common ideology, or the formation of a cartel).

Keeping the splitting-up of the traditional parties outside the figures to illustrate the penetration of new parties in the political arena the numbers per 'electoral decade' are as follows: four, five, six and eight. Even if some of the smaller parties represented from 1978 to 1985 disappear, the Belgian party system is gradually opening up, broadly at the rate of at least one party per decade, with the 1980s probably being the decade for the Ecologists. Together with the splitting of the traditional parties (see below), this entrance of new parties has caused a considerably increased degree of fractionalization.

1.4 Changes in political positions: from left–right polarization to a left–centre–right disposition

From the liberation of the greater part of the Belgian territory in September 1944 until August 1950, Belgian politics was dominated by the Royal Question. The core of this issue was the eventual return to Belgium of King Leopold III, imprisoned and deported at the end of the war. His return was challenged by the Socialists, the Communists and most of the Liberals because of his behaviour and attitudes during the war, and also because of his pre-war stand on *particratie*. Belgian society was deeply split over this issue, and the longer the conflict lasted the more it polarized the political antagonists. The two big parties, CVP-PSC and BSP-PSB, stood on each pole and could not enter into coalition with one another except by putting this central issue in cold storage. Thus electorally, as well as in parliament, small majorities around one of these two parties had to be formed, with several parties joining in one coalition (for example the Liberals and Communists),

who strongly opposed one another on other important issues such as socio-economic organization and the reconstruction of the country.

The controversy surrounding the King, as well as other related issues such as the repression and trial of collaborators and Flemish activists became more and more associated with two of the basic conflicts in Belgian politics: Catholics versus Freethinkers, and Flemish versus Walloons and French-speakers. With the exception of the period of the Spaak–Eyskens cabinets (1947–9), when the issue, although with some trouble, was put to one side, the polarization grew ever more intense.[8] The hard line had overtaken the more moderate one, and with every election, the CVP-PSC came a step closer to the absolute majority which it eventually achieved in 1950 (at least with respect to parliamentary seats).

In the meantime, on 12 March 1950, a non-binding popular referendum (the only referendum that has ever been organized in Belgian politics) showed that 57.7 per cent favoured the return of King Leopold III to his royal function. Support for this solution varied throughout the country: in Flanders 72 per cent were for the King's return, while in Brussels 52 per cent were against and in Wallonia 58 per cent were against. After the parliamentary elections of 4 June 1950, which gave a parliamentary majority to the CVP-PSC, the one-party CVP-PSC cabinet brought the King back to Belgium. In less than fourteen days, however, under the pressure of demonstrations and violence in the streets, Leopold III was forced to abdicate in favour of his son Baudouin.

The CVP-PSC as a party, its parliamentary majority, and the homogeneous CVP-PSC government, were shattered by this course of events, and after its electoral defeat in 1954, the Socialists, who were the major winners, came to power in coalition with the Liberals. The Socialist–Liberal government of Van Acker (1954–8) furthered the existing ideological polarization of the parties, but in terms of a new conflict dimension: the policy with regard to free schools versus official secondary schools, the so-called school war. Once more, left and right were in sharp opposition for almost four years, and in the elections of 1958, the opposition party, the CVP-PSC, again won an absolute majority of the seats in the Senate (but not in the House). A government without the CVP-PSC would have been impossible, and 'normally' it had to form the government. Thus, a CVP-PSC minority government took over. However, in 1958, the classic pattern which had prevailed since 1945 was abandoned. Rather than either side pursuing a strategy of polarization, and thus attempting to gain an absolute majority in

parliament, negotiations took place between the very leaderships of the three traditional parties seeking political pacification by means of mutual give and take. Thus the School Pact was devised in 1958 and approved first by the party congresses and later on by parliament.

The consequences of this new political strategy were manifold. In the place of escalation, came de-escalation and consociational politics. The role of an electorate virtually choosing the cabinet by pointing to the right or to the left, was deliberately and definitely rejected by the political elite. The religious-philosophical conflict was also considerably defused and, with the Flemish–Walloon problem not yet having acquired its later acrimony, socio-economic policies came more to the fore. The ideological placements shifted: the KPB-PCB remained on the extreme left, but it had been reduced almost to insignificance by the electorate as well as by the elite; the BSP-PSB still occupied the left, but the centre was taken over by the CVP-PSC, with the Liberal Party being moved to the right. In 1961 the Liberal Party took over the programmatic consequences of the pacification in its conversion to PVV-PLP. The old radicalism was abandoned and the party officially opened itself for Catholics (taking in also some small parties). The protagonists of this conversion hoped for a big centre party but saw the PVV-PLP even more rigidly relegated to the right. The governmental pattern also shifted, and a fixed governmental party once again began to function. This was the CVP-PSC which uninterruptedly since 1958, acquired, found or made its coalition partner, sometimes to its left, sometimes to its right, and sometimes on both sides.

1.5 The reduction of the electoral and parliamentary size of the traditional parties

In the period under investigation the electoral support of the CVP-PCS ranged from 48 per cent in 1950 to 26 per cent in 1981; the BSP-PSB ranged from 39 per cent in 1954 to 25 per cent in 1981, while the Liberals ranged from 10 per cent in 1946 to 22 per cent in 1965 and again in 1981.

In the first elections after World War II the CVP-PSC polled 43 per cent—a figure which the Catholic Party had never achieved in the inter-war period. The party's support continued to grow, reaching a maximum of 48 per cent in 1950, which allowed the party to form the only one-party majority cabinet since 1919. Declining again in 1954, its maximum support was almost recovered in 1958 (46.7 per cent). The party suffered a decline in 1961 and a virtual defeat in 1965 (to 34.5 per cent). Split into CVP and PSC, they lost even more votes in the

Table 5.1 Share of popular vote and parliamentary strength of the political parties in Belgium's House of Representatives, 1946–86

	1946		1949		1950		1954		1958		1961		1965	
Party	Seats	Votes (%)	Seats	Votes (%)	Seats	Votes (%)	Seats	Votes (%)	Seats	Votes (%)	Seats	Votes (%)	Seats	Votes (%)
CVP-PSC CVP PSC	92	42.5	105	43.6	108	47.7	95	41.1	104	46.7	96	41.5	77	34.5
BSP-PSB SP PS	69	32.4	66	29.8	77	35.5	86	38.7	84	37.1	84	36.7	64	28.3
PVV-PLP[a] PVV PLP-PRL[b] PL	17	9.7	29	15.3	20	12.0	25	12.9	21	11.8	20	12.3	48	21.6
KPB-PCB	23	12.7	12	7.5	7	4.7	4	3.6	2	1.9	5	3.1	6	4.6
VU			–	2.1[c]			1	2.2	1	2.0	5	3.5	12	6.7
RW													2	1.0[d]
FDF													3	1.3
Ecologists														
Others	1	2.7	–	1.7	–	0.1	1	1.5	–	0.5	2	2.9	–	2.0
Total	202		212		212		212		212		212		212	

Party	1968		1971		1974		1977		1978		1981		1985	
	Seats	Votes (%)	Seats	Votes (%)	Seats	Votes (%)	Seats	Votes (%)	Seats	Votes (%)	Seats	Votes (%)	Seats	Votes (%)
CVP-PSC														
CVP	50	22.3	47	21.9	50	23.3	56	26.2	57	26.0	43	19.3	49	21.3
PSC	19	9.4	20	8.2	22	9.1	24	9.8	25	10.1	18	7.2	20	8.0
BSP-PSB	59	28.0	61	27.2	59	26.6	62	26.9						
SP									26	12.4	26	12.4	32	14.6
PS									32	13.0	35	12.7	35	13.8
PVV-PLP	47	20.9												
PVV			20	9.5	21	10.4	17	8.5	22	10.3	28	12.9	22	10.8
PLP-PRL			11	5.6	9	4.8	14	5.9	14	5.3	24	8.6	24	10.2
PL			3	1.6	3	1.2[e]	2	1.1	1	0.7				
KPB-PCB	5	3.3	5	3.1	4	3.2	2	2.7	4	3.3	2	2.3		1.2
VU	20	9.8	21	11.1	22	10.2	20	10.0	14	7.0	20	9.8	16	7.9
RW	5	3.4	14	6.7	13	5.9	5	3.0	4	2.9	2	1.7		
FDF	7	2.5	10	4.5	9	3.8	10	4.3	11	4.3	6	2.5	3	1.2
Ecologists							–	0.4	–	0.8	4	4.8	9	6.3
Others	–	0.4	–	0.6	–	1.5	–	1.2	2[f]	3.9[f]	4[g]	5.8[g]	2[h]	4.7[h]
Total	212		212		212		212		212		212		212	

[a] Until the election of 1961: Liberale Partij–Parti Libéral.
[b] From 1976 to 1979: PRLW (Parti des Réformes et de la Liberté de Wallonie); since then, together with the Brussels PL (Parti Libéral): PRL (Parti Réformateur Libéral).
[c] Actually a predecessor of the VU, called Vlaamse Concentratie (Flemish Concentration).
[d] Actually three predecessor parties of the RW, merged in 1968.
[e] Electoral alliance between FDF and PLDP (Parti Libéral Démocratique et Pluraliste, grouping most French-speaking Liberals in Brussels).
[f] One seat for the Vlaams Blok and 1 for RAD-UDRT. The votes cast for these two parties were 1.4 and 0.9% respectively.
[g] Three seats for RAD-UDRT and 1 for the Vlaams Blok. The votes cast for these two parties were 2.7% for the RAD-UDRT and 1.1% for the Vlaams Blok.
[h] One seat for the Vlaams Blok and 1 for RAD-UDRT. The votes cast for these two parties were 1.4 and 1.2% respectively.

elections of 1968 and 1971 (declining to 30.1 per cent). Only from 1974 onwards did they recover, such that in 1977, and again in 1978, they increased beyond their 1965 level. In 1981 however, a considerable loss of votes (10 per cent) brought the two Christian-Democratic parties to by far their lowest ebb (26.5 per cent) since 1944. In 1985 these parties recovered (to 29.8 per cent).

The best years for the Socialist Party were the 1950s and then the 1940s. In the 1960s and certainly in the 1970s, the party registered its lowest support since the introduction of universal and equal suffrage in 1919. More precisely, Socialist Party support grew rather steadily from 1946 (32.5 per cent) to 1954 (38.6 per cent), stayed almost at that level until 1961 (36.7 per cent), but then experienced an abrupt decline to 28.3 per cent in 1965, from where it declined further, very gradually, to 25.1 per cent in 1981. For the Socialists too, 1985 showed some recovery (to 28.3 per cent).

Until 1961 the Liberal Party recorded a vote of about 12 per cent, with a low of 10 per cent in 1946 and a high of 15 per cent in 1949. Following its reorganization as the ideologically more tolerant PVV-PLP, its support grew considerably to 22 per cent in 1965, dropping thereafter (to 16.8 per cent in 1971 and 1978) not least as a result of the splitting-up of the party. Yet suddenly, in 1981, the 1965 result was repeated (Table 5.1). Can this strength be consolidated? The 1985 elections meant a gain for the PRL, but an equal loss for the PVV.

What is of particular significance is the decline of the support for the traditional parties from more than 95 per cent in 1950, and more than 90 per cent in the 1950s, to less than 75 per cent in 1971 as well as in 1981. As can be seen from Table 5.2, votes lost shifted largely to the federalist parties in 1970s (ranging from 22 per cent in 1971 to 16 per cent at the end of the 1970s) and to new parties in 1981 and in 1985.

The considerable shift towards the federalist parties was a signal to the leadership of the three traditional parties, which from 1974 on responded by trying again to solve the ethno-cultural problems and therefore (from 1974 on) to undo the anathema towards these parties. One such outcome was a change in some constitutional requirements affecting the formation of the cabinet and its implementation of policies while a far-reaching system of checks and balances for the linguistic groups was also introduced (Craenen and Dewachter, 1980). Not only must there be a linguistic parity among the ministers (with the possible exception of the prime minister), but since 1970 also a two-thirds majority and a majority in each linguistic group of the House and the Senate is required for the passage of ethno-cultural or linguistic bills.

Table 5.2 Share of votes by category of party

Year	Traditional parties	Federalist parties	Communists	New parties	Small parties, not represented
1950	95.2	–	4.7	–	0.1
1961	90.6	3.6	3.1	–	2.8
1971	73.7	22.3	3.1	–	0.8
1978	78.3	15.5	3.3	0.9	2.1
1981	73.0	15.6	2.3	7.6	1.5
1985	78.5	10.6	1.2	7.4	2.3

Some French-speaking leaders have tended to push this even further, arguing that the national government should have a majority in each of the three regions, a claim which was given up in the early 1980s. Such checks and balances render the formation of cabinets very difficult, particularly once the dominant parties split up and lost voters.

1.6 The splitting of the traditional parties

In the 1960s, when the dramatic issues of the 'Royal Affair' and the school war were solved, the political leaders intended to give primary attention to socio-economic problems, but they found themselves in fact face-to-face with the ethno-cultural cleavage between the Dutch-speaking Flemings in Flanders and Brussels and the French-speaking community in Brussels and Wallonia. Classical means of pacification were attempted, ranging from putting some questions in cold storage, to the passage of certain legislation and the making of agreements between senior leaders. But by the end of the 1960s these practices proved on the whole ineffective. One particularly major issue concerned the location of the French-speaking Catholic University of Louvain. In view of the strong grassroots opposition movement, Flemish Catholic leaders could not but take over the Flemish option, which led to the splitting of the Catholic Party, first into three and then into two parties: the Flemish CVP and the French-speaking PSC.

In the election which would have to decide this issue (in so far as elections in Belgium do decide issues) the Liberal PVV-PLP took a strong unitarist and Belgicist position, hoping to win massive support. In the event, however, the party suffered a small loss of votes, which together with the inability of the party leadership to align Flemish and

French-speaking Liberals behind imprecise unitaristic solutions on the ethno-linguistic issues, broke the party into three: the Flemish PVV, the Walloon PLP and the Brussels French-speaking PLP which shortly afterwards split into two very small parties: a moderate and a radical party in linguistic matters. In 1976, some RW leaders transferred to the Walloon PLP, which then changed its name to PRLW (Parti des Réformes et de la Liberté de Wallonie). In 1979 these Walloon Liberals and the French-speaking Liberals from Brussels merged to form the PRL (Parti Réformateur Libéral).

The Socialist Party did not split up in the 1960s, apart from its Brussels federation, but rather reorganized internally in an effort to give more autonomy to the ethno-linguistic wings. In the autumn of 1978 Socialist unity broke suddenly on the refusal of the Flemish Socialists to follow the dominant Walloon wing any longer in its strategy of a 'Front of French-speaking Parties' (an agreement for joint action of the Socialist Party, the PSC and the FDF to effect the regionalization of the state: see Ceuleers, 1980). So, ten years after CVP-PSC and PVV-PLP, the last of the 'national parties' broke up. The two separate parties that emerged only maintain very loose ties with each other.

Within ten years the number of traditional parties doubled. But the change is much more qualitative than quantitative. There are no more 'national parties', that is, parties that have a considerable electorate on both sides of the linguistic border. This is a special feature of Belgium, for even in federal states parties tend to cut across internal state boundaries.

Three main consequences follow from this process. To begin with, a national party in its internal organs mitigates ethno-cultural conflicts. This weakening of antagonism no longer functions, so freeing the ethno-cultural polarization between parties from its previous restraints, as was evident for instance in the 'Front of French-speaking Parties'. Even non-ethno-cultural matters, which nevertheless have a different sensitivity in both cultures, are no longer solved within the party,[9] but rather come directly to the cabinet and public opinion. The issue-solving function of the national parties is therefore considerably lessened, the split itself represents organizational incentives to polarization.

The second consequence is the emancipation of Flemish participation in Belgian decision-making. Except for CVP-PSC, where at least in the 1960s a parity between Flemish and French-speaking leaders was achieved, French-speaking leaders dominated, despite the rise of

Flemish electorates. By splitting the parties, the power of Flemish leaders increased.

The third consequence is the duality in ties between the two parties of the same ideological group. Organizationally the split is complete: they form two different parties. But ideologically some close ties continue to exist; both parties go together in government or in opposition: a split in cabinet participation has not yet occurred.[10] As such, the number of parties forming a coalition is smaller than that mentioned above, although the manner in which parties of a similar ideological position can be brought into the cabinet has been made considerably more difficult.

1.7 The abolition of the anathema of Regierungsunfähigkeit *for parties*

The Belgian political elite traditionally agrees to exclude anti-system and anti-structure parties from cabinet participation. These parties are considered a priori as not *regierungsfähig* (eligible for government participation), as their values and objectives are felt to be incompatible with those embodied in the elitist consensus.

For a long time, the Belgian elite has in this way excluded such non-elitist opposition parties as the Belgian Workers' Party before World War I, the Flemish nationalist parties (the Frontpartij and VNV between the two World Wars and the Volksunie until 1974), the Communist Party since its foundation in 1919–21 (except for restricted government participation in 1944–7), the Rex party from 1936 to 1944 and the Walloon nationalist RW and Brussels FDF parties from 1965 to 1974. The size of these non-elitist parties in Belgium, measured in the percentage of the votes of the electorate, has fluctuated, rising from 3 per cent in 1919 to 25 per cent in 1936 during the inter-war period, and from 2 per cent in 1954 to a high of 26 per cent in 1971 in the post-war period. To the extent that these non-elitist parties have a substantial electorate, their exclusion narrows the space for a normal government–opposition model. The period under consideration shows a reversal of this pattern, with the exclusion of one party in the beginning and the inclusion of some parties at the end of the period. As pointed out above, the Communist Party was accepted as *regierungsfähig* at the end of World War II. The traditional political leadership and the supreme command of Allied Forces undoubtedly found it a more useful strategy to neutralize the broad support—the party had about 100,000 members—the effective organization, and the strategic moves of the Communists and thus their possible threat to the

political and economic system. As such, from the end of 1944 onwards, the Communists participated in the cabinet coalitions.[11] With the onslaught of the cold war the party again was considered and treated as an anti-system party, while only the basic principles of democracy prevented it from being totally banned.

The story of the federalist parties (which were anti-structure but not anti-system parties), on the other hand, reflects the consociational tendency in Belgian politics. The constitutional revision of 1970, which granted some cultural autonomy to the Dutch- and French-speaking communities and which extended some regional autonomy to Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels, was carried through as a pacification attempt by the three traditional parties (CVP-PSC and BSP-PSB in the cabinet and PVV-PLP in opposition). As a pacification policy, however, the constitutional revision proved unsuccessful, and eventually the ban on federalist parties had to be lifted. Pressure for this change derived partly from the electoral losses suffered by the traditional parties since the 1960s, and partly from strategic moves by the federalist parties themselves. The presence of a French-speaking and Walloon party as well as a Flemish one provided the opportunity for a fair deal between the two linguistic communities. The RW in 1974, and the VU and FDF in 1977, participated for the first time in government. The RW, first suffering internal dissent and later an actual split, was forced out of the cabinet in 1977. The Volksunie participated only in the fifth Tindemans and the subsequent second Vanden Boeynants cabinets in 1977 and 1978. The FDF was allowed to continue in the first Martens cabinet until the beginning of 1980.

Before then the Volksunie, the RW and FDF adopted the opposition strategy of the *zweeppartij* (literally a 'whipping' party). Such a pressure party (usually a small party), by posing an electoral threat to the power basis of a big party to which it has some affinity, tries to force the big party to take its aims into account. The whipping party basically operates a political strategy aimed at stimulating the implementation of certain policy objectives, but necessarily leaves such implementation to the bigger party. Thus, the VU has largely served as a *zweeppartij* to the CVP, the FDF to the PLP, and the RW and PCB to the PSB (Dewachter, Lismont and Tegenbos, 1977). As far as the national parties were concerned, these pressure parties seemed to be exacting actors. The more so as they could remain radical in their demands and programmes, without having to compromise with other parties.

The cabinet experience of the federalist parties was hardly a success, however. The RW split and suffered a severe electoral defeat in 1977

and again in 1981, partly due to new splinter groups; a process of 'progressive disappearance of the party' (Fraeys, 1982) that was terminated in 1985. The Volksunie had to deal with a party secession since 1977 and underwent an almost equally severe electoral defeat as the RW in 1978, which was only partly undone in 1981. The party relapsed in 1985; but here the question remains to what extent this loss has to do with the cabinet participation or rather with the growing sociological autonomy of Flanders providing fewer grounds for Flemish-national voting. The FDF at first seemed to come out best, experiencing neither electoral loss nor gain in 1978. But in 1981 the party suffered a significant loss, which was the ultimate sign for several of its important MPs to realign with traditional parties. As a result the party in 1985 won the support of only 1.2 per cent of the national electorate, thus preserving merely one-fourth of its electorate of 1971 and 1974.

Equally important, due to the grassroots opposition in Flanders, the pacification pact of 1977—the so-called *Egmontpact*, in which the Volksunie and the FDF had participated—could not be implemented. The reorganization of the state, which was eventually carried through in 1980, was thus achieved by the traditional parties, the federalist parties having returned to opposition.

The number of parties which can be called on to form the government has been enlarged, but there is no obligation whatsoever to take the federalist parties in account. On the other hand, due to the important compromises which these parties had to accept to gain entrance to government, the very nature of these parties has been challenged, while the radical pressures on the national parties have been lifted, the more so as by splitting up they themselves became more radical in ethno-cultural matters.

The ecologists, as pointed at earlier, are not yet considered *regierungsfähig*.

1.8 Conclusion

The party system underwent a significant number of changes in the manner of competition in Belgium in the four decades under investigation. The dominant parties—Catholics, Socialists and Liberals—which had been the sole or dominant actors for about a century, lost party of their dominance. New parties emerged on the political scene at the rate of about one per decade, thus reducing, sometimes quite considerably, the electoral and parliamentary size of the traditional parties. Moreover, the stigma of the federalist parties, their non-

acceptability for government, disappeared, as happened to the Communist Party right after the war.

The tackling of the ethno-linguistic cleavage, rather than finding a lasting solution, led to the splitting up of the dominant parties, thus doubling the number of traditional parties, almost doubling also the difficulties in forming cabinets, even though the two ideologically-linked parties go into government or into opposition together. Important, too, is the fact that, at the end of the 1950s, a change in the general position of the parties had occurred: a left–right polarization, BSP-PSB versus CVP-PSC, with the small Liberals in the middle, was replaced by left–centre–right disposition: BSP-PSB on the left, the biggest party, CVP-PSC, in the centre, and the smaller Liberals on the right.

Yet, in a broader setting there would appear to be more stability than this first section indicates. The following sections will therefore look more closely at other aspects of the party system with a view to factors accounting for this continuity.

2. Parties at level of the electorate

2.1 Functional limits of the electoral system

In order to understand the rather low level of political participation in Belgium, one has to be aware of the relative paucity of institutional channels for participation. At the national level, the Belgian citizen is called on to vote only in general parliamentary elections. There is no provision for presidential (or prime ministerial) elections or referendums (with the exception of the unique consultative referendum of 12 March 1950). Moreover, the impact of general elections is characterized by severe limitations: the electorate's inability to appoint the cabinet; the lack of correspondence between electoral choice and cabinet formation; the little programmatical substance of the electoral possibilities.

If one party gets an absolute majority in both Chambers, it can form a cabinet, but with the exception of the homogeneous CVP-PSC governments of 1950–4 and the minority government of 1958, all cabinets since the introduction of universal suffrage (1919) have been coalition cabinets, many of them changing coalition partners without elections intervening. As was argued above, the alternating model, by which the electorate chooses the cabinet, was deliberately and definitely rejected by the political elite in 1958.

Furthermore, there exists a large dissimilarity between the categorical requirement of voting and the necessity of coalition governments. In contrast to the parties, which must negotiate and thus make compromises after the elections, the voter has to adopt a quite rigid and partisan position. If he votes, it must be for one party only, disregarding completely all other parties. Yet the parties must amalgamate these categorical verdicts into a majority and come to a mutual compromise. Here lies one of the causes of alienation of voters from parties: the 'stern' voter will not always accept the 'compromising' party.

The lack of clear programmatical guidelines forms the third negative aspect of the electoral possibilities. The categorical vote cannot make a distinction regarding the variety of issues at stake. The voter has to make a hierarchy of issues, or he must try to solve the conflicting tendencies. Hence, the actual vote means a considerable loss of information. Through the lack of diversification of choice at least along the basic cleavages in Belgian society, a programmatical substance is largely missing in voting.

The one capability the voter has and uses is to distribute the seats in parliaments among the parties, determining the numerical power relations of the parties. Within these limits of strength in parliament, the parties have to cope in fulfilling their institutional roles, for example, passing bills by majority votes and forming cabinets.

2.2 Electoral change and stability

Voting patterns have not changed radically in the post-war period. To begin with, compared to figures elsewhere, non-voting is unimportant in Belgium, averaging about 5 per cent (though it is somewhat higher in some places at the frontiers of the country). Moreover, non-voting has also been quite stable for almost thirty-five years (Dewachter, 1970a; De Winter, 1978). The clearest examples of electoral assiduity are provided by the elections to the European Parliament of 1979 and 1984, when Belgium (together with Luxembourg) scored by far the highest of all nine countries with a turnout of 91.4 per cent in 1979 and 92.1 per cent in 1984. The simple explanation for this high turnout is the existence of compulsory electoral participation (which can be enforced by court). Yet this compulsion does not at the same time create a large invalid vote: this, too, is limited to about 5 per cent, although it has been increasing by about 1 per cent every decade, so that it now stands at 7 per cent. The total of absent voters and invalid votes rose from 9 per cent at the end of the 1940s, to 12 per cent in the 1970s, figures which are not dramatic at all in terms of the political

system. According to survey research, however, the abolition of compulsory voting could lead to a very considerable decline in participation of some 40 per cent, which would indeed shake the legitimacy of decision-makers and decision-making. Bearing in mind the occurrence of such a political 'earthquake' in The Netherlands in similar circumstances at the beginning of the 1970s, the Belgian political elite is unlikely to move away from compulsory electoral participation.

The party vote is also rather stable. With Ireland, Belgium ranks at the average point of electoral volatility among European party systems, being more volatile than Finland, the United Kingdom, Sweden, Switzerland and Austria, but less than Norway, Italy, The Netherlands, West Germany, Denmark and in particular France, which has records double the Belgian level (Pedersen, 1979). Since universal suffrage for men in 1919, electoral volatility in Belgium has been rather limited except in four cases: in 1936 (the emergence of Rex), from 1939 to 1946 (the effect of World War II), in 1965 (the remarkable progress of the PVV-PLP and the Volksunie and the first contests of the FDF and Walloon federalists) and in 1981 (with the CVP-PSC suffering its biggest loss, with gains for the Liberals and the Volksunie, and with the rise of the green parties).

It should also be noted that, since 1968, the Flemish and Walloon electorates increasingly tend towards divergent gains and losses, particularly with regard to the Socialists and the Liberals. This divergence does point to a growing sociologial separation of both regions, which, especially in connection with the splitting up of the traditional parties, cannot be disregarded.

2.3 Weakening of ideological ties

According to an important study by De Smet and Evalenko (1956), the basis of electoral alignment in Belgium is social class. They add:

> the correlations based on social circumstance seem to be less strict in Flanders than in Wallonia. The social factor no doubt influences the Flemish voter's political behaviour, but it happens to be superimposed by religion ... The voters of the left are drawn essentially from the religiously non-practising part of the waged and salaried class, while the CVP-PSC and the Liberal voters belong to several categories: employers and helpers in agriculture, industry and trade, joined by a relatively significant number of religion—practising workers and employees, especially in the Flemish part of the country

where the hold of religion is sufficient to counterbalance the influence of the social factor, even in the bosom of the working class.

This explanation was first contested seriously by Deleeck (1957) arriving at a social class alignment to the CVP-PSC for Christian workers. In one of the first political surveys in Belgium (in 1964), the results did not suggest a clear-cut class, language or religious partition of voters, but rather suggested that electoral behaviour was based on the hierarchy of value systems, achieved mainly through the basic socialization of voters within the *zuilen* (pillars), and by issue pre-eminence (Dewachter, 1967). For Socialist and Liberal voters the socio-economic situation and interests are alone decisive. As to the CVP and Volksunie voters, this value system comes into competition, first, with religious values, and second, with linguistic, cultural or ethnic values. Delruelle-Vosswinkel (1970) has suggested a combination of objective and subjective religion and class identity as the explanation for CVP-PSC voters, on the one hand, and for Socialists and Liberals, on the other. Frognier (1975) arrived at similar results. However, Lijphart found religious practice the best electoral predictor, language being a strong runner-up and social class as a distant third factor (Lijphart, 1979).

The problem is whether these differences are differences of scientific explanation—unable to grasp a rather stable reality—or whether these divergent scientific explanations do in fact reveal a change in the basic ties of voters to parties over time, from 'social class followed by religion' through 'religion followed by social class' to 'religion followed by language'. The results do suggest, however, that the *floating* vote can be accounted for mainly by the shifts in issue patterns. The main issue patterns were chronologically the Royal Question (1944–51), the school war (1952–9), ethno-cultural problems (1959–72) and socio-economic issues (1973–7); from 1977 until 1986, ethno-cultural problems rivalled socio-economic issues. On the other hand, social class and religion account for the vast proportion of *stable* voters, particularly for the CVP-PSC and the BSP-PSB, and partly for the Liberals. But it seems that the intensity with which class and religion bind voters to party is indeed weakening.

2.4 The personification of politics

Since the 1960s politics has become far more personified than before, due to both the growing importance of television and to the con-

siderable expansion of personal propaganda in the electoral campaigns.

Television was introduced in Belgium in 1953. Its take-off was rather slow: in 1958 there were only 223,168 sets. But from then on television ownership expanded at a rate of about 200,000 sets a year, slowing down somewhat at the end of the 1960s. In 1965, 50 per cent of families owned a television set. In 1980 almost 3 million sets were in use, which is about one set for every three inhabitants. Television, like Belgian broadcasting in general, is a state monopoly.[12] In view of the two national languages Belgium always had separate Dutch and French broadcasts. As a general means of communication, television has great importance, not only for the personification of politics but above all for its ability to cut heavily through the channels of communication of the *zuilen*.

The audience for public affairs is quite substantial. The electoral programmes of Flemish television in the 1970s, for example, involving opposing party panels, had an audience of between 1 and 1.5 million viewers (out of a potential of 6 million) during five days. A discussion on the political situation between the party leaders, the day after the 1977 elections, drew nearly 2 million viewers (Santy, 1977). The same goes for French-speaking Belgian television (Thoveron, 1983; Dewachter, 1982a). Elections are certainly the high points of political television. The frequent appearance of ministers and party leaders on news programmes, discussion programmes and in party political broadcasts ensures that the political leaders become well known to the citizens. Leaders are no longer abstract and distant names, but human beings with particular strengths and weaknesses.

A second factor in the personification of politics is a growth of personal propaganda. While the elections of 1958 and 1961 had already given some indications of this, personal campaigning actually started in 1965 and has since tended to expand. In 1971, 68 per cent of all propaganda was propaganda for the party, while 32 per cent was personal propaganda. Three years later the percentages were 64 per cent and 36 per cent, while in 1977 the figures were 61 per cent and 39 per cent (Gielen, 1981), but in 1981 these proportions were reversed to 43 per cent and 57 per cent (Vanpol, 1985). For at least half a century, images of the senior leaders had been used in propaganda but then only occasionally and not to any large extent, being also confined to the very senior leadership (Picque and Du Four, 1977).[13] Since the 1958 election, however, the personification of the senior leadership (Van Acker and Eyskens, Lefèvre, Harmel) has been used in a

systematic way. But personal propaganda also concerns the propaganda which rank-and-file candidates make on behalf of themselves. And this phenomenon is both new and expanding very quickly. Such personal propaganda developed first in Brussels around 1961. It is still in Brussels that most personal propaganda is used. Flanders comes next, both in time (beginning in 1971) and in extent. Wallonia comes third by a long stretch: except for Liège, personal propaganda did not enter into campaigns to any considerable extent until the 1977 election. Such personal propaganda tends to be more extensive as the candidate ranks more highly in the power hierarchy.

With the very high costs of campaigning, personal propaganda induces two dysfunctional phenomena: first, a kind of census selection of candidates is reintroduced, since a candidate must have a considerable amount of money at his disposal to pay for his personal campaign, let alone his contribution to the party campaign; and second, it increases the dependency of candidates on pressure groups which can provide financial support. Paradoxically neither the personal nor the party propaganda have a considerable impact on the electoral outcome as such (Dewachter, 1982a).

In short, personal propaganda reinforces the personification of politics. Together with other factors, it also stimulates preferential voting.

2.5 Preferential voting

Belgian voters not only vote for one party by voting for the relevant list, but may also support one particular candidate of that party (by putting a vote next to his name). As Table 5.3 shows, the number of preferential votes for both the House and the Senate has more than doubled since 1946 (Dewachter, 1967; Deweerdt, 1979; Verminck, 1986). World War II put an end to the considerable increase of preferential voting which occurred from 1929 until 1939. The number of personal votes remained almost constant until 1950. Between 1950 and 1965, however, the number of personal votes increased by about 17 per cent. From 1965 on the growth slowed down. Nevertheless, twelve years later, for the first time, half of the electorate cast a preferential vote, at least for the House of Representatives. The number of preferential votes indeed is higher in the election for the House of Representatives than in that for the Senate.

The parties' supporters follow the general trend over the whole period, with only the share of each party differing. Catholic and Liberal voters' preferential voting is more or less equal. The Flemish nationalist

Table 5.3 Evolution of personal voting

Senate		House of Representatives							
Election	Total	Total	Catholics	Socialists	Liberals	Flemish Nationalists	Communists	FDF/RW	Ecologists
1939	21.6	27.3	38.1	12.9	31.8	28.7	14.1		
1946	17.8	22.6							
1950	15.8	20.4	26.8	10.4	26.5		9.7		
1958	20.6	26.1	32.3	14.5	36.8	28.5	12.3		
1961	25.4	33.0	42.1	19.1	46.8	32.6	17.4		
1965	32.4	39.0	47.5	27.3	46.4	39.5	21.1	27.3	
1968	34.0	41.6	54.0	28.3	50.2	38.1	20.1	25.5	
1971	37.6	45.7	58.1	36.2	54.9	45.5	27.7	26.1	
1974	40.4	49.8	61.7	39.2	57.2	48.4	31.2	38.5	
1977	40.7	50.3	58.3	39.7	59.5	51.8	30.1	36.8	
1978	41.8	51.9	61.1	44.3	55.3	53.4	27.3	41.8	
1981	39.7	48.4	60.3	45.1	49.3	44.7	29.3	39.1	22.5
1985	38.3	48.5	57.7	43.9	55.3	43.4	30.8	49.5	22.3

electorate uses it to some lesser extent, as does the FDF/RW electorate. Having propagated for long time a party vote and having opposed preferential voting, the Socialists and Communists until recently showed the lowest preferential vote—with respectively 20 per cent and 30 per cent less than the PVV-PRLW in 1977. As new parties, deliberately opposing propaganda and personification of politics, the Ecologists score low in preferential vote. This low score is mainly responsible for the decline of the general tendency towards more preferential vote in 1981 and 1985 (Verminck, 1986).

The increase of preferential voting runs parallel with the growth of personal propaganda: according to research in 1974, there was a 0.52 correlation between the two phenomena. But the political position of the candidates also correlates highly (0.61) with the preferential vote (Dewachter *et al.*, 1974). The growth of personal propaganda is therefore insufficient to explain the preferential vote. Rather, other factors must be taken into account, such as the reduction of social distance between politicians and voters (by the personification of politics in the mass media and propaganda, by clientelistic personal contacts, by the cumulation of national and local political functions, and by the lowering of the recruitment base for politicians). Other factors such as the increasing familiarity of the preferential vote (which encountered both positive and negative propaganda—the Socialists argued against it for a long time), and the unequal potential for political participation (due to differences in education and social stratification) also have to be taken into account, not least in order to explain the differences between the parties.

The amount of personal voting is politically important. The electoral code provides that the votes on the party list are allotted to the candidates, according to their rank ordering,[14] so ensuring that those who draw up the lists, rather than the electorate, actually decide which candidates will be members of parliament (Dewachter, 1979). Since 1919, 4,295 members of the House of Representatives have been elected; only 27 of these have been elected from outside the top ranks of the party list as determined by the party. This means that barely 0.6 per cent of the members of the House not in the top positions on the list could ensure their own election; all other representatives owed their mandate to their party. As far as the Senate is concerned, of the 2,146 senators chosen directly, only one was elected who had not been at the top of the list, which is not even 0.1 per cent of all senators. Obviously, the electorate does not appoint the members of parliament but rather decides only on the number of seats for the different parties. The

members of parliament are chosen by the party. Such dependence largely accounts for the strong party discipline among members of parliament: their careers depend on the party, rather than on the electorate. By making insufficient use of the preferential vote, the electorate denies itself the power to choose members of parliament, thus making parliament more dependent on the parties than on the electorate. In contrast, the very same electorate effectively chooses its representatives in municipal elections, using the preferential vote massively (Dewachter, 1970b). In national politics, however, the electorate has not yet recognized, or at least not yet realized, this potential power. The *nur Wähler* (mere voters) do not take advantage of all the possibilities they are afforded by the political elite.

2.6 Growing clientelism leading to an extended party

In Belgium, a classic way of solving personal problems related to public life is not only to contact the appropriate administrative board or service, but also to go to a member of parliament. Clientelism in Belgian politics began as a symptom of small-scale despair, but since the mid-1960s it has grown to an almost consolidated institution. Not only are some parliamentarians obliged to practice clientelism, but now almost every member of parliament does so, announcing a place and hours for being available for consultation.

There is a considerable and expanding scope for clientelism in Belgium: appointments, promotions, permissions, derogations, recommendations, stimulations, subventions, inquiries, . . . with an extensive public administration, a large body of regulations, and according to the neo-liberals *un état tuteur*. Two inquiries into the Flemish parties, one in 1976 and one in 1978, pointed out that the average time given over to consultation was about fifteen hours per month per member of parliament in every party. Yet considerable differences do exist between the members of parliament: Deweerdt (1975) has pointed out that MPs active in parliament may also be active clientelistically, just as some MPs who are inactive in parliament also seem to be inactive clientelistically.

Besides the personal tie typical in clientelistic relations, the counterpart for the clientelistic rendering of service may consist of votes and membership for the party and/or the union. Although politicians agree that clientelism provides considerable electoral pay-offs, its impact on the overall election results and party membership does not appear significant. In some cases, however (for example, nomination, promotion, subventions) perhaps more as a result of politicization rather

than clientelism, the relation can lead to a more personal involvement in elections. Party politics then no longer remain the distant societal occupation for leaders obtaining some support from the rank and file, but provide a lively self-involvement. Party life, whether in success or failure, is extended to one's own personal existence.

2.7 Conclusion

The electorate does not play an important role in Belgian politics and policy-making; its opportunities for expressing itself are neither great nor decisive, while it has almost no institutional means for pushing through its options on issues, nor even for making these options obvious. Only one kind of institutional means of participation is available: the parliamentary elections. Normally the electorate does not choose the cabinet. And when, as in the period 1950–8, the electorate has chosen its cabinets, the political elite has put an end to this practice.

Political socialization aims at a long-lasting political incorporation in the *zuil* 'from the cradle to the grave'. Other than these 'constant' voters, the floating vote, which is usually rather small, seems to be determined primarily by the salient issues in any given election. Nevertheless a clear-cut decision on issues by the nation in the elections is almost impossible because of the very hierarchy of issues that must be dealt with, as well as due to the sheer impossibility of disaggregating options adopted by the electorate. In this sense, the elections seem incapable of providing a binding political mandate.

Hence it is not surprising that the electorate fails to use all the opportunities offered to it, for example by the preferential vote. Nor has this been changed by the considerable personification of politics in mass communications and propaganda. The social distance between the electorate and national politics remains wide. The electorate has been and remains a weak political actor in Belgian politics. As such, a drift towards clientelism, however dysfunctional to the parliamentary system, is not impossible.

3. The internal organization of the political parties

The most important organizational changes in the Belgian political parties occurred at the beginning of the period under investigation following the necessity to rebuild and reorganize the parties in the wake of World War II. Both the Catholic Party and the Belgian Workers' Party fundamentally changed their organization when the war was

over, substituting their hitherto indirect party structure with one based on individual membership, following the three basic levels of party politics: that of the commune, the *arrondissement* and the nation. During the inter-war period, the Catholic Party had a decidedly indirect party structure. The four corporate *standen* (the bourgeoisie, the middle class, the peasantry and the workers) had their own representatives who were more responsible to their respective organization than to the party (Simon, 1958; Gerard, 1985), which was solely a loose amalgam, lacking real internal authority or power. In 1932 and 1936 two attempts at reorganization occurred, the last of which had split the party into two rather autonomous Flemish and French-speaking parties (KVV and PCS). Attempts at party reorganization during and after World War II were aimed at getting rid of both the indirect structure and healing the split (Van den Wijngaert, 1976).

The Belgian Workers' Party functioned also as an indirect structure based primarily on the Socialist trade union, the mutual insurance associations and the cooperatives. Educational organizations, women's organizations and other Socialist groupings had a more limited access to the party (Van Haegendoren, 1967). In addition to this collective affiliation, by which members of the trade unions, cooperatives and mutual societies were automatically party members, individual membership was permitted, but did not carry significant weight due to the small numbers involved. The weight of the unions and the cooperatives (until the crash of the Labour Bank in 1935), as well as the stature of its leaders, meant that decision-making in the party did not pose such problems as in the Catholic Party. But it was sufficiently problematic to bring the indirect structure into discussion. The dissolution of the Belgian Workers' Party in the first year of the war, the re-establishment of the clandestine party, the fact that the union kept its distance from the party right after the war, and the necessity to keep communism under control led the party to abolish the principle of collective affiliation and adopt a direct party structure (Kramer, 1978; Abs, 1978).

In a similar vein, the other parties, if they did not already have an embryonic direct structure (for example, the Communist Party), also adopted this organizing principle.

In comparison with the inter-war period, individual party membership increased considerably, becoming the sole means of entering a party from 1945 onwards. In terms of party functioning, a large amount of attention had to be paid to the membership, even though—or precisely because—the reorganization of the parties had aimed at

improving leadership capacity by making the leadership more independent of external influences, and also by making it a great deal stronger and effective.

At this point it should be noted, however, that the internal functioning of Belgian political parties has seldom been described, let alone analysed. The patterns at the beginning of the period under investigation, in the second half of the 1940s, are almost wholly unknown, as research has been carried out only concerning the 1960s and 1970s. Hence, the scientific basis of this section is particularly limited. Nevertheless, it would appear that there were two major trends in the changes which took place in the period 1945–86: a reduction of internal party democracy on the one hand, and a strengthening of the organization, and of its effectiveness and efficiency on the other.

3.1 Party membership

In 1945 the two most important political parties (which together won 75 per cent of the valid votes in 1946) stressed individual membership as the pre-eminent basis for a new organization. How did the citizen react to this new opportunity? Membership of political parties in Belgium has been low, the proportion of voters who are also members climbing very slowly from 8.6 per cent in 1950 to 11.0 per cent in 1982,[15] see Table 5.4.[16] The new opportunity for membership in 1945 and later did not see a vast inflow to the political parties.[17]

The ratio of members to voters is reasonably constant; when the party declines electorally, so also does the membership and vice versa. Two points should be noted here. First, strong issues seem to have a positive effect on membership levels as well as voting support, particularly for the CVP-PSC. The Royal Affair until 1950 considerably increased the number of members as well as of voters. After the abdication of King Leopold, the figure dropped abruptly from 216,008 to 99,160, a loss of 116,848, or more than 54 per cent! However, within a few years, due to the schools issue, its membership (as well as its voting support) recovered and exceeded the previous record both in 1955 and 1958. From then on, the number of voters and members declined gradually until the mid-1970s.

The second observation concerns Socialist membership, which diverges from the general tendencies since the 1960s. Although the Socialist vote is declining, party membership is growing, reaching 17 per cent of their vote in 1982. An explanation for this disparity has not yet been offered. Moreover, since the early 1960s Socialist Party membership has exceeded that of the CVP-PSC.

Table 5.4 Membership of Belgian political parties

	1946–8	1950		1960	
		Absolute number	Party vote 1950 (%)	Absolute number	Party vote 1961 (%)
KPB-PCB BSP-PSB	100,000[a]	35,000[d]	26.5	14,000[g]	8.6
CVP-PSC		150,000	8.8	196,700	10.2
PVV-PLP	170,232[b]	99,160	4.2	212,442	9.7
VU FDF RW Ecolo Agalev RAD-UDRT		[e]		[e] 2,511[g]	1.4
Total membership	432,000[c]		8.6 7.8[f]	503,000	9.5 8.4[f]

[a] Figure for 1946.
[b] Figure for 1948.
[c] As to the calculation of the overall membership of the parties, for 1950 the figure of 1948 is taken for the CVP-PSC, as the 1950 membership is an exceptionally low one.
[d] Figure for 1949, hence percentage is calculated for the election of 1949 (in 1946 only men were franchised).
[e] For the Liberal Party in 1950 and 1960, where the proper information is missing, arbitrarily the far too high figure of 1970 is taken, so that the comparison pointing to a slight increase is not biased at least in this direction.

1970			1976		1982		
Absolute number		Party vote 1971 (%)	Absolute number	Party vote 1977 (%)	Absolute number		Party vote 1981 (%)
13,125		8.1	14,847	12.6	10,000		7.2
					175,000	(PS)	22.9
					120,000	(SP)	16.1
225,479		12.6	254,830	17.3	295,000	(Tot.)	19.5
107,947	(CVP)		126,053	8.6	116,681		10.0
39,336	(PSC)		51,604	9.5	50.000		11.6
147,283	(Tot.)	9.3	177,657	8.9	166,861		10.5
					67,000	(PVV)	8.6
					59,000	(PRL)	11.4
77,654		9.0	86,031	9.9	126,000	(Tot.)	9.7
36,326		6.2	50,989	9.1	47,410		12.2
			10,518	4.4	12,000		8.0
			±10,000	6.0			
					1,500		1.1
					300[h]		0.2
					5,000[i]		3.1
499,867		9.5	604,872	10.9	664,071		11.0
		8.3[f]		9.6[f]			10.4[f]

[f] Whereas the first global percentages are calculated on the total number of valid votes, i.e. on the total number of party votes, the second percentage is calculated on the total of persons on the electoral roll.

[g] Figure for 1961.

[h] 900 members in 1985.

[i] Figure from the party leadership; probably far too high.

The nature of party membership seems to show all the characteristics associated with increased levels of political participation. The CVP membership includes far fewer workers than the party's electorate, and proportionally the number of members with an academic education exceeds by far the percentage within the electorate.[18] Compared to the electorate, white-collar workers and cadres are also overrepresented in the PSC, while blue-collar workers are manifestly underrepresented.[19] The same tendencies are evident in the membership of the Volksunie: overrepresentation of men already extant in the electorate, is still accentuated, more higher-status professionals, more middle-aged people and more educated people (Volksunie, 1983).

Compared to the membership of the trade unions, the general features of party membership are not congruent. Union membership is about six times larger than party membership, with 1,000,000 members in the Christian ACV-CSC and 900,000 members in the socialist ABVV-FGTB in the beginning of the 1970s (Luykx, 1973). Indeed, the unions have a membership rate of about 70 per cent of all workers and employees, while within the period 1945–77 membership grew steadily from just over 1 million (450,000 + 570,000) to just under 2 million (1,000,000 + 900,000) in the 1970s, and even more (2,500,000) in the 1980s. The power relationship between the two big unions, in terms of membership, has also changed in this period, the ABVV-FGTB being the stronger in the 1940s but the weaker in the 1960s.

The Liberal union (ACLVB-CGSLB), which is much smaller, grew from 53,000 members in 1947 to 136,000 in 1971, thus also exceeding the membership of the PVV-PLP. In some respects the extent of their membership gives the trade unions more authority than the political parties.

According to survey research, the trade unions are seen as better defenders of one's interest than the political parties: 34.5 per cent of citizens rate unions as the best defenders of their interests as against 18.5 per cent for political parties and representatives (Dewachter, 1975).

Parties are not so convincing and attractive in terms of membership. But what do they really offer? According to their statutes, members of the Belgian parties do not have extensive rights. They can normally attend meetings on the local level, elect a local board and the representatives of the local section at the higher levels of the party (Huyse, 1969). Yet, according to the statutes, members do have duties: to be militant, to be politically educated, to accept party discipline, and to

pay the membership fee. It must be admitted that these rights and duties are not very attractive and can hardly account for the scale of the membership. So, the questions arise: what is the use of membership in Belgian parties; what are the real incentives, what are the functions?

Two years after the introduction of individual membership in the BSP-PSB, the party chairman, Max Buset, stated:

> The system stands the test. It provides the party with effectives, which we would not have dared to hope for before the war. It obliges the militants to become more active within the party. It binds the members more effectively to the actions of the party. It puts within their hand a direct sanction in case the party fails to respond to their demands. And above all, it establishes the independence of the party (Abs, 1978).

This avowal of Max Buset stresses the functions of party membership, the main one being to undo the indirect party structure and make the party independent. It provides both the legitimation and the canvas for organization. In addition, it forms a basis for mobilization, a recruiting area for militants, a means of control on a wide realm running from voters to militants, an affirmation of the power of the leadership, and a footing for resources (financial and other) for the party. Party democracy, if it exists at all, definitely takes second place. Party dynamics, primarily at the system level, could be hampered by internal polyarchy.

3.2 A limited internal democracy

The key occasions for intervention in party decision-making are the setting of the policy objectives in the discussion of the party programme, the discussion of the important strategic and organizational moves relative to the internal party system—both normally occurring at the party congress—the election of the party leadership, and the selection of party candidates for general elections. A close examination of these important moments will indicate which positions and strata are particularly influential in party decision-making.

The party programmes. Scholarly efforts, some of them rather ingenious, have led to a very nice mapping of the programmatic positions of the Belgian political parties (De Bakker, 1969; Frognier, 1978; Capron and Kruseman, 1982). To illustrate these mappings, one of the most broadly elaborated is summarized in Table 5.5 which gives

Table 5.5 Positions of the Belgian political parties on the relevant cleavages, based on the positions of their members of parliament, 1968.

Socio-economic cleavage		Clericalism/ Anti-clericalism		Ethno-cultural cleavage	
Conservative pole	+2.00	Clericalism pole	+2.00	Flemish positions	+2.00
PLP	0.87	CVP	1.61	VU	1.49
PVV	0.31	PSC	1.31	CVP	1.39
PSC	0.17	VU	0.66	BSP	0.91
CVP	0.12	RW	0.41	PVV	0.70
RW	−0.58	PLP	0.36	PLP	−0.76
VU	−0.60	PVV	0.13	PSC	−0.81
FDF	−0.88	FDF	−0.44	PSB	−1.04
PSB	−1.21	PCB	−0.75	FDF	−1.37
BSP	−1.48	BSP	−1.11	RW	−1.50
PCB	−1.70	PSB	−1.26	PCB	−1.58
Socialist pole	−2.00	Anti-clericalism pole	−2.00	French and/ or Walloon positions	−2.00

the results of a survey of the attitudes of members of parliament on more than thirty issues carried out in 1968 (De Bakker, 1969).

On the socio-economic cleavage, the Communist Party argues for state ownership and state control, as does the Socialist Party though to a considerably smaller extent. The federalist parties take a centre-left position on this dimension, more to the left than the CVP and PSC with their workers' movements. The Liberals are to the right. Until 1978 no Belgian party has really defended reactionary positions.

As would be expected, the Catholic CVP-PSC is closest to the defence of Catholic views. It has no competitor on that dimension. The federalist parties take a middle position, as do the Liberals following their transformation into a philosophically open, tolerant party. The Socialists prove stronger advocates than the Communists of anti-clerical positions and free-thinking points of view.

The programmatic demands of the Flemish emancipation movement are best caught by the Volksunie and then by the CVP; the two other Flemish parties follow to a lesser extent. On the French and Walloon side the most radical positions are taken by the Rassemblement

Wallon, followed by the FDF. Socialists and Communists have an intermediate position. The Liberals and the PSC have unitarian positions.

Though this basic mapping, which locates political parties on the main cleavages in Belgian society, can be found by and large in other scholarly studies, it does, however, seem to be more an academic device than a political tool. What is the value of the doctrine, programmes and platforms in Belgian politics?

The programmatic writings of the Belgian political parties have generally minor political significance, primarily because the coalition character of Belgian cabinets forces negotiations and compromise. To put it another way: political leaders are placed in a decisive position of choice whenever the partisan claim for objectives has to be abandoned, at least partially, if the goal of cabinet participation is to be achieved. Consequently the programmatic writings of the parties tend to be produced hastily, by ideologues who are not necessarily representative of the party as a whole, with the result that the writings themselves do not have the necessary authority to be imposed. They seldom are submitted to party congresses for real discussion, while if submitted it is mostly in a ritualistic, propagandistic way. It should again be emphasized that the decisive foci for political decision-making are issues. And the party leadership, as well as the leadership of the *zuil*, have different and powerful levers to make and unmake issues.

The functioning of the party congress. All statutes of all Belgian political parties proclaim the party congress as the highest organ of the party from which the fundamental positions of the party derive and to which the boards and councils are responsible for the execution of congress directives. In reality, however, congress often is anything but a supreme decision-making organ or a democratic instrument. A series of conditions have to be fulfilled before militants, if not cadres, can really decide in party congresses. To start with, congresses have to be organized. The CVP-PSC did not hold a single congress between January 1966 and April 1969, although the party was in government for the whole period. The BSP-PSB organizes twice as many congresses when in opposition as when in government (Lyben, 1973). The choice of the theme of the congress is obviously important. The great PVV-PLP congress of 1967, for example, could not debate the important political options then being considered by the CVP-PSC and PVV-PLP cabinet. A tendency exists for the preparatory commissions, which are always appointed by the party executive, to put their own stamp on the

proposed resolutions. If, indeed, resolutions are adopted at all: the Flemish Socialist Congress of 1976, for example, did not adopt a single resolution, only a 'message to the Flemish people' that could not be amended.

Time, opportunities and autonomy should be allowed for preparatory discussions in the lower federations of the party, at the level of the *arrondissement*. Inter-federation communication should not be prevented but encouraged. For example, the Flemish Socialist Congress of 1967 failed to organize such communication and therefore failed to consider a federal solution for the ethno-linguistic problems. When such communication is organized, however, as was the case during the ideological congress of the BSP-PSB in 1974, a thorough discussion does take place. The steering committee of the congress and its chairmen determine the time for discussion and the voting procedures. At the CVP congress of 1977, which decided on cabinet participation, each speaker got the floor for only three minutes, while each federation was allowed only one speaker. At that congress the party adopted the Egmont pact which that same party rejected just eighteen months later in a more open and thoroughly prepared congress. The parties use various voting procedures, ranging from acclamation to a general vote, from a vote juggling away the amendments to a clear vote on amendments and resolutions. Almost all congresses before elections are overwhelmed by ritual and propaganda, and real debate is extremely rare.

Due to the controlling use of these levers of participation by the party leadership, party congresses in Belgium are usually unable to fulfil their decision-making function. And although parties in the post-war period have stressed individual membership, there seems to have been no change from the 1940s to the 1970s in this respect. Party congresses can have other, more organizational functions, however: a campaign function, an integration function, a selection function, an instrumental function for the party leadership to display the party's objectives, and the arbitration function in internal party conflicts. Belgian parties do use congresses for these different functions, depending on the perception of leadership of the function which the congress should play at the given moment.

The election of the party leader. Although the party leadership consists of a wider group than the party chairman alone, by looking at the election of the party leader one not only focuses on the most important party figure, but one also gets a fair sample of how the other senior

party figures are elected or appointed, if these appointments even reach that level of internal democracy.

Two important features characterize the election of party leaders across all the parties: the specific electoral body involved and the degree of competition. The electoral body varies from all party members in the case of the PSC (about 20,000 participants), through the party congress in most parties (from 200 to 1,200 participants), to the party council (about 120 participants) in the case of the Volksunie. The degree of competition, on the other hand, ranges from general acclamation of the only proposed candidate, through an 'election' involving one candidate, and an election contested by different candidates, one of whom has the declared preference of the existing party leadership, to a real open and fair competition between different candidates. The one-candidate election means that only a positive or negative vote, or non-voting, can be registered. The BSP-PSB uses the acclamation procedure most frequently. If any other procedure is used it is the one-candidate election. For the CVP-PSC the one-candidate election is by far the most common procedure, having been used on fourteen out of a possible twenty-one occasions over the whole period. The exception here is the francophone PSC since 1970 which, in placing the election of its chairman in the hands of party members, comes nearest to offering a real alternative. In the case of the PSC, in about 50 per cent of its party leadership elections a real alternative has been offered, while in 36 per cent of cases there has been a one-candidate election. A striking exception to the general procedure was the 1985 re-election of G. Deprez: the Directoral Committee of the party cancelled the elections because only one nomination was introduced.

Since the split in 1968, the Flemish CVP sticks to the old tradition of a one-candidate election. The percentages with which the one candidate has been accepted, though always very high, are nevertheless interesting, ranging from 97 per cent for De Schryver in 1948 to 83 per cent for Lefèvre in 1960. With the exception of the PSC since 1970, the emergence of real competition in these parties—as in the CVP-PSC in 1950 (Lefèvre versus Van Hemelrijck) and in the PS in 1981 (Spitaels versus Glinne)—is an indication, as well as a consequence, of an internal crisis of the party, divided in rival tendencies. As such, it is a situation for the leadership to avoid, and very seldom occurs in reality.

The Liberals also primarily favour one-candidate elections, as does the Rassemblement Wallon, while it is the exclusive method in the Communist Party. The FDF uses open competition as well as one-

candidate elections. The right of the party members to elect their party chairman is significantly hampered in the FDF, as it was in the RW, by the procedural condition of a localized meeting. In the Volksunie, the 'founding father' Frans Vander Elst was simply re-elected in a one-candidate election until 1973 as was the national secretary, W. Jorissen, also a 'founding father'. Thereafter, however, with the aim of changing the leadership, elections for party chairmen were bitterly fought in 1973, 1975, 1978, 1979 and required more than one ballot. After one-candidate elections from 1981 to 1985, the 1986 competition was fairly amicable: all candidates were taken into the new leadership of the party. Yet it must also be remembered that it is not the party congress, let alone the party members, but the far more restricted party council which elects the party leader.

In sum, we can note a greater opening towards more internal decision-making in the parties. First, there is the direct election of the party leader by the party members in the PSC since 1970, and second, the new strong electoral competition in the Volksunie which, however, is based on a very restricted constituency. Despite these changes, the main feature of party-leadership appointment is that it originates in a decision of an inner circle, which is then presented to the party congress for acclamation or an overwhelming majority vote in a one-candidate election. The real choice is generally made at the very senior level. In addition, the duration of the party chairmanship in Belgium is long, averaging, in the period 1945–69, twelve years in the BSP-PSB, five years in the CVP-PSC and six years in the Liberal Party.

Two major changes have occurred over this period with regard to the power and position of the leadership. During the 1970s, party chairmen had a considerable power in nominating ministers from their party. This power was not so evident before: the ability of other outstanding leaders to impose themselves, the power of the *formateur* about to become prime minister (see Section 4.1), and simply the fact that party chairmen were not always consulted, let alone present, at the negotiations to name the ministers, acted to reduce the leader's influence. Until 1961 the party chairman did not become prime minister, nor even a minister. After 1961, however—the way was opened by Theo Lefèvre—the normal channel to the position of prime minister was the leadership of the party, while for parties which normally could and cannot expect the prime ministership, leadership of the party led to the position of deputy prime minister. There are some exceptions to this pattern, but the effective cases are too numerous and too evident to deny the overall change.

It has to be stressed that, on becoming prime minister, the party leader in Belgium resigns the leadership. According to the official argument, it is hard to be the categorical leader of a party while being the conciliator within the coalition as prime minister, and so a new party leader is chosen. But by the same route, a possible new claimant for a top position in the cabinet comes to the fore. This duality is a sound base for factionalism, instability, discordance and conflict, unless one 'chooses' inexperienced young leaders as lieutenants, as recently proved to be the case under the fifth Martens cabinet. The real party leaders were taken in the cabinet as prime minister and deputy prime minister, while the official party leaders were essentially their right-hand men. A new tendency or just the time for these lieutenants to become full colonels? The sixth Martens cabinet rather points in the second direction.

The selection of candidates for the general elections. A considerable change has occurred in the selection procedure for candidates for general elections. During the period 1946–68, within the three traditional parties, a mixed system of nomination by committee and primary elections by the party membership existed. Since the 1970s, however, the primary procedure has disappeared almost completely.

Proportional representation in Belgium is not organized nationally but in *arrondissements* with the possibility of provincial allocations (*apparentement*). The parties therefore propose lists of candidates by electoral *arrondissement*. The compilation of these lists is an intricate process, differing considerably within each party and from one election to another.

The Belgian Socialist Party makes high demands of active participation in the party and the Socialist *zuil* upon its candidates for the lists. These conditions, which were strictly maintained until the late 1970s, resulted in a very inbred profile composed of elements stemming from the ranks of the party and the *zuil*. These candidates are then proposed to the members of the party in a primary, or 'poll', where their rank order is determined. Only party members have the right to vote. Little more than half of the total membership participate in the 'polls', ranging from 48 per cent in 1958 to 55 per cent in 1978 (De Winter, 1980b). At the same time, however, the level of democracy within the party concerning the compilation of the lists was not perfect: other ways of drawing up the lists occurred, such as federal congresses or committees, while some techniques of manipulation and agreement were also used. For the elections of 1958, for instance, 90 per cent of the

3.3 Organizing for increased tasks

In comparison to the textbook's models, Belgian political parties are far from well organized. In 1975 the CVP party chairman, W. Martens, said of his party, which is considered to be the best organized: 'What is there so exciting about a party which even cannot properly deliver its own newspaper?' Yet, *pace* the literature, this section will suggest that the political parties *can* organize and mobilize on a major scale. Furthermore, it will attempt to underline the improvements and extensions of party organization, certainly in the 1970s. With the exception of the organizational schemes in the party statutes, which are themselves inadequate, figures and schemes concerning the reality of the organization of parties are completely absent. This section is therefore based on indirect observations only.

The expansion and financial burden of electoral campaigns. Electoral campaigns have expanded considerably in Belgium. Since the end of the 1950s the amount of electoral propaganda has more than doubled. Two reliable indices are available: first, statistics on the number of leaflets delivered by mail for most of the elections (Regie der Posterijen, *De post in cijfers*); and second, the calculation of costs of campaigns by the Department of Political Science of the University of Louvain. Figures are given in Table 5.6, in which 1977 is the starting point for the calculation of the indices.

Campaigns for parliamentary elections more than doubled in size between 1965 and 1978, while there was a threefold increase in size in campaigns for municipal elections. Moreover, the frequency of campaigns was quite high, with twelve national elections taking place between 1964 to 1982, which implies a heavy burden in terms of both organization and finance.

From the mid 1960s campaign costs increased considerably (see Table 5.7). The total costs of the general election campaign in 1968 amounted to 213 million BF and those of the election campaign of 1974 to 218 million BF. The costs of the campaign for the local elections of 1976 amounted to 383 million BF, while those for the general elections of 1977 cost 440 million BF. These amounts include all expenses: those of the candidates for their individual propaganda, the propaganda expenses by pressure groups for one party, and the campaign of the party itself, at the national as well as at the *arrondissement* and local level.

As can be seen from Table 5.7, the traditional parties normally spend

Table 5.6 Growth of electoral campaigns in Belgium

Election year	Leaflets delivered by mail (thousand)	Indices						Total cost of campaign (BF millions)
		Parliament		Municipal		European Parliament		
		Mail	Costs	Mail	Costs	Mail	Costs	
1964	29,779			23.3				
1965	64,100	50.1						
1968	75,780	59.2	48.3					213.0
1970	41,396			32.4				
1971	105,956	82.8						
1974	86,563	67.7	49.5					218.2
1976	105,065			82.1	87.0			383.4
1977	127,940	100.0	100.0					440.4
1978	130,529	102.0						
1979	42,639					33.3	43.9	193.3
1981	134,332	105.0						584.1
1982	99,723			77.9				

considerably more than the new and small parties. The federalist parties began very modestly, but within a decade were able to build up a fairly large campaign, with the Volksunie developing its campaign to a greater degree than the FDF-RW. Usually campaign costs relate to the electoral size of the party, but the tremendously high figure for the PVV-PLP in 1968 underlines the fact that political parties, at least the traditional ones, are able to mobilize very considerable resources. Yet such efforts may also prove dysfunctional. First, fund-raising tends to introduce a bias in the selection of candidates. One has to have a considerable amount of money to run, as candidates are obliged to pay for their own campaign and contribute finances to that of the party. Second, it tends to give scope for political pressure on the candidates, the party and the cabinet after the elections. The crisis that struck the PVV-PLP after the elections of 1968, following its enormous campaign, came about largely as a result of the failure of the leadership's campaign for a unitarian programme, and its ensuing failure to enter the cabinet, which was shortly to cause the party to split up. But its collapse was to a certain degree due also to the party's considerable debts: many of its creditors could not expect the services, the support or the *entrées* for which they had hoped.

In view of the high costs and of the manifest dysfunctions inherent in the expansion of electoral campaigns, several proposals (including

Table 5.7 Electoral campaign expenditures by political party, 1968–81 (BF millions, not corrected for inflation)

Parties	1968	1974	1976	1977	1981
CVP	24.0	37.6	73.2	97.1	129.6
PSC	24.0*	25.0	30.6	47.2	50.4
(B)SP				51.3	76.2
BSP-PSB	39.0	53.3	94.8		
PS(B)				48.2	66.2
PVV		26.2	37.6	61.9	75.6
PVV-PLP	102.0				
PLP and					
PRL(W)		19.4	16.8††	41.1	49.7
FDF		12.4†	11.8	14.4	29.4
RW	6.0	6.1	7.8	10.6	
VU	14.0	23.3	31.4	40.4	51.1
KPB-PCB	4.0	10.0	8.7	23.0	19.5
Other parties	–	5.1	70.9	5.2	36.4
Total	213.0	218.2	383.4	440.4	584.1

* Addition of the separate PSC and Vanden Boeynants list in 1968.
† In 1974 together with the Brussels Francophone Liberals (PLDP), which in 1976 are again located with the Liberals.
†† PL included.
Source: Dewachter *et al.* (1974); Dewachter *et al.* (1977); Gielen (1981); Cleymans (1984); Vanpol (1985).

government ones) seeking to control and lower these costs have been introduced in parliament, but none has yet been successful.

Improving party finances. In the 1970s, the number of elections almost doubled, compared to the 1960s or the 1950s, and campaign costs rose steadily, so that the financial resources of the parties bore a heavy burden indeed. Until the 1970s, the three main sources of party finance were the membership fee, the contributions from the party's members of parliament, of the provincial and local councils, and the donations of trade unions, mutual insurance associations, cooperatives and private enterprises, banks and holdings.[20] In 1974, an annual subsidy of 200,000 BF per member of parliament was allocated to the parliamentary parties for secretaries, research and assistance with the aim of giving minimal support to MPs.[21] In 1979, this sum was further raised to 250,000 BF and indexed, standing at 563,050 BF per member of

parliament in 1982. The total subsidy involved increased from 77.4 million BF in 1974 to 188.7 million in 1980 and about 217 million in 1982. However, at most 30 per cent of these funds stay in parliament, with some 70 per cent going to the party, i.e. some 54 million BF in 1974 and some 132 million in 1980 (Jennar, 1982).

In addition to these state subventions, there are also less sizeable gifts or transfers, such as the almost yearly postal subsidy from postage-stamp issues (increasing from 2.9 million BF in 1973 to 6.1 million BF in 1981). In 1979 a subvention of 100 million BF was given to the parties to cover their expenses for the European elections, distributed proportionally according to the parties' strength. More-important parties, especially the traditional ones, offload a part of their wages onto the state by appointing some of their personnel to ministerial *kabinets* and/or to the administration, or use persons on the *kabinets* or administration payroll for partisan purposes. The total ordinary budget for all parties in 1982 can be estimated at 550 million BF: 240 million from membership fees, 150 million from parliament, 80 million from elected office holders, 50 million from payroll shifts and 30 million from various other sources (Braeckman, 1983; Deweerdt, 1983). Parallel to this state subvention a better organization of the parties was attempted; the Volksunie and the CVP showed the way.

The extraordinary budget of the parties, on the other hand, serves to pay for electoral campaigns. Apart from the savings from the ordinary budget, transferring to this budget, the sources for this consist in special fund-raising. According to Raymond Scheyven, long-serving treasurer of the CVP-PSC, and later of the PSC:

> When someone acquires something with the help of the party, then he will be reminded at the right time that a small contribution to the election campaign fund would be very welcome.... I do not move for less than 100,000 BF. At every call, I obtain three to five hundred thousand francs, but frequently millions. I do not guarantee a return, but can make arrangements for meetings. And after every election, I organize in my home a meeting with the big donors and the Prime Minister and the Ministers for Economic and Financial Affairs. (*Nordwestdeutscher Rundfunk*, 29 March 1982).

Though not always in such an overt manner, all parties agree that they are obliged to go to the banks, industry, the unions, mutual services, cooperatives, and so on, in order to raise money for their campaigns.[22] At the other end of the political spectrum, the testimony of

the chairman of the Communist Party, L. Van Geyt, is symptomatic: 'It is possible that some members or Communist sympathizers who are in business and deal with the Eastern European countries give some money to the party. But in no case is there an automatic taxation on all commercial transactions with Socialist countries' (Braeckman, 1983).

What occurs at the national level is repeated, on a smaller scale, at the level of the *arrondissement*, at the local level and at the individual level. Campaigns have to be financed; funds must be raised. One can provisionally conclude that this type of financing is very considerable, that it is given to all parties eligible for government. Moreover, one can also assume that the donor expects payoffs in return or else contributions 'for past services'. Clearly, all this creates additional opportunities for pressure groups and reinforces a corporatist orientation of politics. Financially well-off interest and pressure groups do not scorn this entry to the decision-making.

The fund raising is also a means to strengthen the *zuil*.

3.4 Conclusion.

The period under examination began with an important organizational change in the most important parties, the CVP-PSC and the BSP-PSB. Both parties moved away from their indirect structure in order to gain power, coherence and independence. Certainly, both succeeded in gaining internal power and coherence. (The question of independence will be discussed later in relationship with the *zuilen*.) The corner-stone for the new style of organization was individual membership. Within the period, however, there has been a strengthening of party leadership. One indicator, the composition of the party lists for general elections, clearly points to a diminishing impact of party members in internal decision-making. Other indicators do not counteract this tendency. The participation in the party congresses seems low and their role has not changed in the long run. Members have an impact on the election of the party leader only in one party, and that not the most prominent.

The great programmatic liberty for the party leadership, which means essentially the capacity to manipulate issues and to take independent positions, has not changed. Consequently, party membership is generally inactive. What has emerged instead is a party leadership that has more space for manœuvring and policy-making.

The considerable rise in campaign costs has made the parties more vulnerable to and dependent on pressure groups with financial resources. While underlining the open, 'extrovert' character of the organization and functioning of parties, this change also underlines

their vulnerability. The traditional parties, depend primarily on the large socio-economic organizations of their *zuil*. When they move outside such familiar ground, contact remains on the elite level, given their financial character.

This tendency was partly countered by the move towards state financing of the parties, which formed the catalyst for a successful improvement of the party organizations. In the late 1970s the party machineries at last begun to work efficiently. Long-term party leaders got an improved organizing device, less affected by militants and members. The functional and instrumental nature of these changes are clearly in line with the tenets of *particratie*.

4. Partisan intervention in decision-making

Because elections are not decisive in gaining top political positions, parties need to be more than simply election-winning machines; they must elaborate an organization actually designed to win the top offices. Parties do this by controlling the formation and maintenance or dissolution of cabinets. Furthermore, Belgian parties also develop the means to control policy, from its conception to its implementation, which goes far to consolidate the *particratie* character of much of the decision-making in Belgium.

4.1 The political parties in cabinet formation

Cabinet formation in Belgium follows the classic scenario of a 'parliamentary democracy' with coalition cabinets. The process starts with consultations by the King, who subsequently appoints an *informateur* and later a *formateur*. The job of the *informateur* is to explore and pave the way for the actual cabinet formation which, in turn is led by the *formateur*. This *formateur* conducts negotiations on the governmental programme with some of the political parties. If he succeeds, the agreement is put before the party congresses. (If he fails, another *formateur* is appointed who enters new negotiations with at least one different party.) After that step, the *formateur* (who normally becomes prime minister) leads the negotiations with the leadership of other parties on the distribution of the portfolios and the nomination of ministers, who are formally appointed by the King. The cabinet then goes to parliament, with a statement of its programme, requiring a vote of confidence in both the House of Representatives and the Senate.

Pre-eminent actors in this process are therefore the Crown and the

party leaders (Dewachter and Clijsters, 1982). Prior to any cabinet formation, the King consults the most eminent spokesmen of the political, social and economic elite. Information about the King's appointments of an *informateur* and a *formateur* being scanty, it is not easy to provide an objective assessment of the degree to which the Crown takes into account the opinions of the political, social and economic elite. The influence of party leaders is certainly much stronger in the choice of the *formateur*, but at both stages the Crown's preferences are considered to be influential (De Meyer, 1967; Ceuleers, 1978; Molitor, 1979). When a cabinet coalition eventually is formed and the distribution of portfolios agreed upon by the party leaders, the constitutional right of the King to 'appoint and dismiss his ministers' may even then result in a veto on his part against individual politicians.

Whereas parties have only a partial influence on the choice of the *informateur* and the *formateur*, the leaders of the parties involved are the only really important actors, apart from the *formateur*, in almost all of the subsequent phases. While the voters may have given some indications, and while experts and pressure groups may try to influence the course and the outcome of the actual negotiations, there is nevertheless no doubt that the top party leaders control the whole process. The party leaders decide on the policy objectives which the cabinet should pursue. Later they also have a decisive influence on the distribution of portfolios within the cabinet as to their realm and number, and within the party as to the selection of the ministers (Dewachter, 1981a). The leaders of the coalition parties have to reckon with other actors on only two occasions: when the negotiated agreement, which will serve as the government's programme, has to be approved by larger party assemblies; and when the cabinet has to obtain a vote of confidence in parliament. However, in both instances the leadership in each party has many means at its disposal to ensure that there will be no rejection of the agreement and of the cabinet that has its support.

Before 1961, approval by a party congress was statutorily obligatory only in the case of the Belgian Socialist Party, but since then it has become customary in all parties. The party congress is in fact simply asked to 'take it or leave it' and, by approving the outcome of the negotiations, to declare its trust in the party leadership. Considering what has been noted about the party congress in the previous section, it comes as no surprise to find that advice of the leadership has never been rejected.[23]

Party discipline is even stricter when the parliament is asked at a later stage for its vote of confidence (Holvoet, 1980). Except for three cases, very little deviation from the party's whip instructions can be noted, and even then it remains very limited: barely 3 per cent of the coalition parties' MPs either vote against the new cabinet or abstain, while in twelve cases out of twenty-eight, whip instructions were strictly followed without a single deviation. Individual politicians belonging to one of the coalition parties may criticize the coalition or its programme, but they rarely openly defy party discipline with a negative vote—not least because of their dependence upon the party for re-election. Both phases in which other party strata play a role may provide an indication of the degree of opposition within the party and within the coalition, but at the stage of cabinet formation itself the impact of these political strata cannot be considered decisive. Political parties definitely do have a substantial capacity to control who wins the top political positions of prime minister and minister (Dewachter, 1973). Within the party, it is the leadership which is in control of such decisions.

4.2 Improving the instruments for partisan intervention in decision-making

Politicization of the public administration. Political parties in Belgium—certainly the traditional ones—are not satisfied with achieving the top political position only. They have gradually developed a considerable set of means of controlling actual decision-making and the implementation of policy.

With few exceptions, all writers on the subject agree that there is a rapid growth in the politicization of the public administration in Belgium.[24] While it is difficult to assess to any definite degree the politicization of the civil service since World War II—some writers have noted a considerable politicization of the civil service even before the Second World War (De Winter, 1980a)—it can definitely be seen to be expanding.

The politicization of public administration in Belgium takes three forms: the recruitment and promotion of personnel; the introduction of partisan views and options in decision-making; and the information flow of the intentions and options of the minister or his *kabinet* to the party or the union.

Although there are strict regulations designed to exclude partisan interferences or clientelism from the process of recruitment of civil servants, a number of techniques have been developed to bypass these

regulations: exceptional measures; recruitment of temporary employees and complementary personnel who are then 'regulated', that is incorporated in the normal corps by a law specifically made for that purpose; politicization of the examinations for regular recruitment; and the unconventional appointment of members of ministerial *kabinets*. The special law of 1953 'regulated' about 30,000 cases, that of 1960 about 32,000, and that of 1965 an unknown number, and that of 1972 23,000; in the period 1972–4 a further 20,000 personnel to be 'regulated' were recruited (De Winter, 1980a). As the figures show, the quantitatively most 'successful' way is the 'regulation' of temporary and complementary personnel. The total number of public employees increased from 556,200 in 1953 to 840,200 in 1977, or from 16 to 22 per cent of the total working population, providing substantial opportunities for politicization. But not every sector in public employment is equally accessible to the government. However, the central civil service employed 91,227 staff in 1949 and 380,796 in 1979; in addition the 'parastate' sector had 134,624 employees in 1968 and 191,981 in 1979.

As to promotion, politicization occurs only at 'level one', which is normally that of university-trained civil servants. Below this level, promotion seems to be a matter of bureaucratic regulation. As the minister has the right to decide, political promotion is not difficult, and seems to happen in about 5 per cent of cases (Depré, 1973). These 5 per cent of cases seem to be strategic ones, however. (The figure tends to be low because the large Department of Finance falls almost completely outside the scope of politicization.) Moreover, since at least 1961, special attention has been given within the government to a representative spread of nominations and promotions for the parties in government and, since the 1970s, a commission (successively known as the Deletrée, then Sweerts, and later Dekens Commission) has been instituted to organize such deals.

One good turn deserves another. The promotion to strategic positions in level one is amplified by the presence of a greater number of candidates than positions. These candidates serve the interest of the party in the civil service, generally for long periods. The two other ways of politicization, namely to inform the party or the union of the intentions and options of the minister or his *kabinet* on the one hand, and the introduction of partisan views and options in decision-making on the other hand, become in this sense quite understandable. The professional ethos of the civil servants gains a definite partisan coloration: as the political party one supports has the best programme

for the common good, the general interest is then best promoted by the strength and progress of that party. Thus the civil servant can act appropriately.

However, none of these ways represent the most decisive intrusion of the party into the decision-making of the civil service and of the minister, nor even into policy implementation; the most decisive intrusion runs through the ministerial *kabinet*.

The ministerial staff. On coming to office, a minister gathers around him a staff of about five to ten leading experts closely related to his own party, as well as a number of executive staff members, also belonging to his party. This ministerial *kabinet* has to fulfil a complex and burdensome role (Van Hassel, 1974). The *kabinet* is the think tank of the minister, established to provide him with expertise and advice on problems that arise, on policies to be carried out, on the timing of decision-making and on the implementation of decisions. The proposals for policy are expected to combine considerations of cost, benefit and political momentum. Such a role clearly requires complete political reliability. But there are still other components. The *kabinet* has to stimulate the administration, seeking to control, coordinate and innovate. The *kabinet* is obliged to substitute services if those of the administration are ineffective (for political reasons) or inefficient. The *kabinet* has also an external role in that it has to deal with pressure groups and lobbies, and to take care of the minister's public relations and his contacts and relations with the press. Its role *vis-à-vis* the activists in the political system is one of screening as well as one of activating or being a catalyst. All in all, it involves a tremendous workload for able executives and experts with a solid partisan orientation.

The ministerial *kabinet* has expanded considerably. The number of level one experts increased from eighty-eight in 1946 and 175 in 1960 to 342 in 1977 and 438 in 1983. The total number of employees in the ministerial *kabinets* is considerably higher: about 750 in 1960, 1,867 in 1973, and, in 1983, 1,677 at the national level and 1,072 at the level of the regional *kabinets*, a total of 2,749 persons (Van Hassel, 1974; Snoy et d'Oppeurs, 1979; Van Velthoven, 1983).

In most departments, if not in all except the Department of Finance, the ministerial *kabinet* places the administration under its tutelage. Interventions and directives from the *kabinet* deal with the general policy-making of the department, as well as with staffing problems, budgeting, the organization of the services and their work, the

objectives to be pursued, and the priorities in the tackling of problems (Van Hassel, 1974). To a considerable degree, the ministerial *kabinets* lead and control the civil service in its mapping of policies as well as in the establishment of priorities and options. They even intrude in purely executive or administrative work.

As the *kabinets* are pure partisan bodies—except for a few recent cases where there is a mutual ingression in the *kabinets* from some parties in the government—they provide a considerable source of the partisan impulse and intervention in decision-making. The *kabinet* system gives the minister a partisan apparatus to cope with general administration.

4.3 Conclusion

Most features in the first chapter pointed to a weakening of the political parties at the level of government. The number of parties increased. There were splits in the traditional parties within a period of ten years. Their electoral size was considerably reduced. Even the federalist parties had to be promoted to the status of *Regierungsfähigkeit* in an (unsuccessful) attempt to get rid of the ethno-cultural problems. Yet, to conclude from this that there has been a weakening of the political parties in decision-making, and thus a weakening of *particratie*, would be too hasty a conclusion. Access to the highest political positions, in this case the cabinet positions, is substantially in the control of party, and particularly of the party leadership. Moreover, as the public administration has expanded, so has its politicization and, more generally, so too have the means by which parties can have an impact on government.

The ministerial *kabinet*, accumulating brains, motivation and expertise, expanded considerably in the period under consideration, developing into a decisive instrument for partisan intervention in decision-making. Policy-making is now fairly well controlled by the political parties or, at least, by the party leadership.

The political leadership, or more precisely the political elite, fundamentally changed the political strategy in 1958 from one of polarization and choice of the cabinet by the electorate, to a consociational policy aimed at pacifying the basic cleavages and issues in Belgian politics. Indeed, to a very substantial degree a fraction of the Belgian elite came to control societal evolution. But, how fractionalized and how isolated is that political elite? This is the question which will be addressed in the final section, which places political parties in the context of the whole of Belgian society.

5. The political parties in their societal environment

The political system in Belgium is not clearly marked off from its societal environment. In other words, at the analytical level, it is quite difficult to establish precise boundaries. Politics is inextricably linked to Belgian society, not only through the classical processes of inputs and outputs, but also by many far-reaching organizational links as is the case with *verzuiling* (pillarization or compartmentalization), and by the overarching elite entanglement.

5.1 The verzuiling *of Belgian society*

Belgian society is characterized by a considerable degree of *verzuiling*; the *zuilen* are constellations of groups and organizations based on philosophical or ideological grounds, which perform certain societal functions. Three main *zuilen* exist in Belgium: the Catholic, the Socialist and the Liberal (see Table 5.10). The federalist parties do not have a *zuil* structure. The core of the Catholic *zuil* is of course the Roman Catholic Church which, though rather clerical in its attitudes, has been remarkably open and tolerant since the second Vatican Council. Around this core are linked a number of other groups, organizations and institutions. Particularly close to the core is the Catholic educational system, which provides for all types of education, from *Kindergarten* to university, and which has considerably more pupils and students than the official educational system. The Catholic hospitals and clinics are also of central importance. The political party, too, the CVP-PSC, stands close to the core. Although officially a non-confessionally bound Christian party, it is in reality a Catholic party, as were its predecessors. In the party itself there are three *standen* (estates): the workers (both blue- and white-collar), the farmers, and the middle class, together with managers and owners of enterprises and the liberal professions. Each of these *standen* has its own organizations, closely tied to the *zuil* as well as to the party.

The workers and employees' *stand* has as its strongest organization the Catholic trade union movement, ACV-CSC, which, as we have seen, has had since 1959 a larger membership than all other unions, reaching 1,339,987 members in 1983. This *stand* has its own educational organizations for youth, women and men. It has its own economic organizations: cooperatives, an insurance company, and a savings bank. The Christian League of Mutual Insurance and Assistance Associations reaches some 4.5 million members, out of a total figure of 9.9 million affiliated to such associations in the country as a

whole.[25] The *stand* also has its own press, with publications which include two daily newspapers, the Dutch *Het Volk* and the smaller French *La Cité*, and a weekly, *De Volksmacht*, which has a circulation of a million copies. All of these organizations are in turn overarched by a socio-political coordination organization, the ACW-MOC (Christian Workers' League), which is officially unified, though since 1961 the ACW and MOC have been going their own way, with the result that the Flemish ACW supports only the Flemish CVP, while the French MOC supports the PSC and, since 1977, also to a certain extent the FDF and RW and some splinter groups of Démocratie Chrétienne.

The farmers in Flanders (mainly Catholic) are effectively incorporated in the Boerenbond, a powerful overarching organization with cooperatives, an insurance company, a savings bank, and educational organizations. It also has some ties in Wallonia, and is closely related to the Alliance Agricole, a Walloon farmers' organization. Agricultural policy in Belgium, largely in the hands of the Catholic Party, is in its turn mainly influenced by this Boerenbond.

The middle classes, too, have their Catholic organizations, both educational organizations and pressure groups, albeit solely in Flanders. As far as the French-speaking part is concerned, there are only general pressure groups. In the PSC, however, and openly since the mid-1950s, the representatives of the self-employed, the middle classes and the entrepreneurs of small firms act as a group within the party: first as the MIC (Mouvement des Indépendants et des Cadres), later as the CEPIC (Centre Politique des Indépendants et Cadres Chrétiens) and since 1982 as the RCC (Rassemblement du Centre Social Chrétien) opposing the Démocratie Chrétienne (representing the MOC). The influential French Catholic newspaper *La Libre Belgique* offers a significant amount of support to this tendency of the middle classes and entrepreneurs.

There also exist mainly educational organizations for Catholic employers, notably the Verbond van Christelijke Werkgevers en Kaders (VKW), which has a series of service organizations for smaller business firms, and the Association des Dirigeants et Cadres Chrétiens. In general, however, employers' organizations are not tied to a *zuil*, but have general organizations, at the national, regional or sectoral level—the national Verbond van Belgische Ondernemingen—Fédération des Entreprises de Belgique (VBO-FEB); the Regional VEV in Flanders (Vlaams Economisch Verbond) and UWE (Union Wallonne des Entreprises) in Wallonia; and the sectoral Fabrimetal, the National Building Confederation (CNC-NCB), VEB-UEEB (electricity pro-

duction and distribution), FCN (chemicals), the Belgian Association of Banks, the Association of Insurance Companies, the Belgian Association of the Steel Industry, Belgian Oil Federation (BPF-FPB) and Febeltex, to name the most important.

Local, regional and national leaders of the *zuil* organizations have strong ties to the party, and are often elected to office for the party. Several MPs also have a leading position within these organizations.

As we have seen, at the time of its founding in 1945, the CVP-PSC wished to abandon the indirect party structure. Yet this change did not imply that the *standen* lacked influence. A good indicator, therefore, is the affiliation to the *standen* of the CVP and PSC members of parliament, as presented in Tables 5.8 and 5.9 (Smits, 1982).[26]

Two major points have to be made about these tables. First, although the discussion on the 'families' is far more developed in the PSC than in the CVP, there is a far greater proportion of non-affiliated MPs in the PSC than in the CVP. In general, 40 per cent or more of the PSC members of parliament are not affiliated to any of the *standen*. On the basis of these figures, it is hard to understand the intensity of the public debate concerning the PSC, especially in comparison to the CVP where the *standen* are far more advanced, yet where nevertheless the debate is not nearly so strong. Indeed, in the CVP, less than 10 per cent of its members in the most recent parliaments are not affiliated to the *standen*. In general, since the mid-1960s, almost all CVP members of parliament have been affiliated to a *stand*. This is particularly important. Second, an interesting shift in the affiliation pattern arose in the CVP. Members affiliated to the farmers' organizations virtually maintained their strength throughout the thirty-five years, with only a slight decline which, compared to the decline of the agricultural sector in these decades, represents relative growth. The members affiliated to the middle class organizations show an equally minor gain in their share. The major changes, however, occur in the number of MPs affiliated to workers' organizations and in members without affiliations. The latter group declined from 36 per cent in 1946 to 7 per cent in 1981, while there was almost a compensating growth for the workers organizations, with the ACW extending its representation from about 33 per cent to 50 per cent. The CVP, according to this yardstick, has therefore lost a considerable part of its independence as a party, *vis-à-vis* the *standen*. However, as yet, the party has not returned to the inter-war situation in which it functioned with an indirect party structure.

There is some evidence of an indirect structure in the so-called Commission for the Agenda, an overarching ad hoc committee,

Table 5.8 House and Senate representation of the *standen* in the CVP (per cent)

Affiliation	1946	1949	1950	1954	1958	1961	1965	1968	1971	1974	1977	1978	1981
ACW	32	33	33	33	34	35	38	43	45	48	49	48	50
BB	21	20	20	24	22	19	22	17	19	15	17	17	18
NCMV	11	14	15	20	22	18	19	23	20	22	20	21	18
BB + NCMV	–	2	3	2	4	7	6	4	5	5	5	6	7
None	36	31	29	21	18	21	15	13	11	10	9	8	7
N	118	130	136	119	130	120	108	95	89	98	105	108	83

Table 5.9 House and Senate representation of the *standen* in the PSC (per cent)

Affiliation	1974	1977	1978	1981
DC	38	40	36	32
CEPIC	20	22	23	21
None	42	38	41	47
N	40	45	47	34

composed of the leaders of the main organizations of the *zuil*: the party, the union, the Catholic employers' organizations, the Boerenbond and also the Catholic middle-class organizations. This Commission performed a consultative role for the party, but according to some scholars it also had a determining influence (Meynaud, Ladriere and Perin, 1965).[27] As the Committee for Freedom and Democracy it organized the 'school war' from the Catholic side.

The Catholic press is important, with the French-language Catholic press accounting for about 28 per cent of the French newspaper circulation and the Dutch for 57 per cent in 1958, 66 per cent in 1968 and 70 per cent in 1982 (Van der Biesen, 1970). It is the *zuil* rather than the party which has a direct role in decision-making in these papers (De Winter, 1980a). The press generally offers strong support to the party, with only two Dutch newspapers, *De Standaard* and *De Gazet van Antwerpen*, being inclined also to support to a limited extent the Flemish nationalists. The authoritative *La Libre Belgique* voices traditional views, Catholic as well as elitist. However, in the last decade, it has lost a considerable part of its authority.

This subordination of profane functions to religious realignment, which is the essence of the *verzuiling*, has played a vital role in keeping the various organizations and the two linguistic wings together in the Catholic Party. In this sense, one should not underestimate the importance of the various *zuilen* for party politics in Belgium.

The party fulfils a number of functions for the *zuil*. It politically articulates the demands, wants and needs of the organizations in the *zuil*, as specifically Catholic organizations but also as organizations as such. The party represents the *zuil*, defending the Catholic faith, advocating the ideology that grew out of the *zuil*, and articulating what are perceived as 'Catholic interests'.

Parties as organizations for the political interest-articulation of the

result that one is able to maintain plurality by appointing and promoting journalists according to the relative strength of parties. The same holds true for other institutions, as for example the plural universities of Antwerp and Hainaut.

As can be seen from a number of indicators for the 1960s and 1970s in Table 5.10, *verzuiling* has been more or less maintained.

One important change which can be noted from Table 5.10 is the decline attendance at mass from 43 to 30 per cent, which undoubtedly would be reflected also in other cultic practices. Indeed, if one could make comparisons with the 1950s, the decline would be even greater. From the 1950s on, one can also note another change, the decline in votes for the political Catholic Party from 47 per cent in 1958 to 34 per cent in 1965 and 36 per cent in 1977. The opening of the Liberal Party to Catholics in 1961, with the abandonment of the old radicalism, to some extent accounts for the decline in the Catholic Party in 1965 and, as such, for the weakening of the Catholic *zuil*. On the other hand, one could argue that there has been a considerable gain for the *zuil*. The CVP-PSC began in 1945 as a party not bound to any particular confession; church authorities rejoiced at that position (Van den Wijngaert, 1976). Very soon (already in the electoral contest with the UDB in 1946) the party was linked to the Church and by that to the *zuil*.

In addition to the decline in Catholic cultic practices since the beginning of the 1960s, widespread episcopal interference in politics (for example, by pastoral letters) has almost ceased.[28] To a considerable degree, the second Vatican Council has 'declericalized' the Church and emancipated Catholic laymen.

Cinema and broadcasting, but above all television, have thwarted the closed system of communication within the *zuil*: alternative views now penetrate into the living room. On the other side, all attempts at the formation of a (travaillist) party have failed, notwithstanding the support they received.

At the same time, changes have occurred much more in the Church and in the system of religious belief than in *verzuiling* itself. An open-minded attitude has emerged in the Church; its eagerness to 'convert' was replaced by tolerance.

In the other *zuilen* the main changes seem to be the decline of the Socialist press (from 16 per cent of all the press in 1958 to 7 per cent in 1979)and the organization of a small free-thinking *zuil*, communicating particularly through the mass media, and offering an alternative for those not attached to a religion (Witte, 1982).

The performance of the profane functions by the *zuil* organizations

Table 5.10 *Zuilen* in Belgium: distribution of the total population during the 1960s and the 1970s (percentage of total population or of category population)

	Socialist *zuil* 1965–8	Liberal *zuil* 1965–8	Unbound* 1965–8	Catholic *zuil* 1965–8	Catholic *zuil* 1974–7
Baptism			6	94	87
Church marriages			14	86	78
Church funerals			16	84	84
Hospital treatment			23	77†	
School children up to secondary schools			32	68	68
Schools			40	60	
Union membership	44	7	–	49	50
Students at university	16		35	49	50
Newspapers	12	22	19	47	49
Votes in social elections	50	6	–	44	49
Attendance at mass			57	43	30
Mutual societies membership	31	6	21	42	44
Party votes in general elections	28	22	16	34	36

* Not affiliated or not practising, although belonging to the category, or affiliated or practising in general or official institutions and organizations.

† Only 46% as far as the Catholic hospitals are concerned; the 77% are obtained by adding the 31% public hospitals served by religious congregations.

Source: Figures mainly from Billiet and Dobbelaere (1976); and Dobbelaere (1980). Some other statistical sources have been also used.

in these decades has proved to be sufficient to consolidate their organizations (Dobbelaere, 1980). If we add the growing clientelism, we can accept the conclusion of Lorwin (1966) that 'Ideologies have been losing their thrust and their rancour. But organizations based upon them have become increasingly well established in most of organized social life'. Yet it must also be noted that vast sectors in Belgian society are not at all, or not significantly, or have ceased to be affected by *verzuiling*: economic life, the distribution sector and the market, the administration (except in its politicization), justice (likewise), the army, sport, art, housing (almost no longer), and public relief (except for clientelism and politicization). Some attempts at *verzuiling* of these sectors have failed, while others are still going on but lack success.

5.2 A new institutionalization for socio-economic policy

Such social organizations as trade unions, mutual insurance associations—themselves connected with parties—and professional and business organizations, are represented in the numerous advisory boards and councils that contribute to policy-making in Belgium. A recent inventory of these advisory and consultative bodies (Van Velthoven, 1982), concerning all kinds of policies, concluded that they numbered about 600, with a total of 9,000 members. Not all of the bodies which have been set up are functional, 25 per cent being totally inactive or only partly active, while 15 per cent have not been convened for several years.[29]

A great many of them are important, however. As Prime Minister G. Eyskens once said of one of them: 'In the National Committee for Economic Expansion we not only deliberate, but we also try to arrive at decisions' (*Vrij Nederland*, 8 April 1972). Indeed for social, economic and financial matters (involving together about 150 bodies), as well as for public health, these circuits of decision-making are fairly well established: specific names and organizations and formal power may change from time to time, but the actors involved and their capacity for decision-making are maintained.

This new institutionalization had already begun in the 1930s, as a means to tackle the economic crisis and its consequences, and made major headway from 1944 to 1952 with the social pact and its concomitant legislation. Since then, not only has socio-economic demand articulation been taken over to a large extent from the political parties by the unions, but even decision-making on socio-economic matters is largely handled by these parallel institutions; decision-making which is

afterwards pushed through parliament. A kind of new decision-making institutionalization is therefore growing in these important advisory councils for socio-economic policy. It is also undoubtedly most developed in social matters. Much of the advice is in fact obligatory, and the social agreements achieved on national, sectoral or plant level are binding. In economic matters, councils are genuinely advisory, though even here there are exceptions such as the National Committee for Economic Expansion.[30] In financial matters, in general the councils have regulating power for internal matters and advisory functions for external policy matters. As to the representation, unions achieve their strongest representation in social councils and their weakest in financial ones; the reverse holds true for the economic and financial organizations (Van Outrive, 1973).

A. Van den Brande's study (1974) of the impact of associations involved in this new institutionalization in the period 1954–68, shows that representation in advisory councils correlated far better with results than did size of membership. This supports the thesis of an institutionalized decision-making process, mainly as far as socio-economic policy is concerned. Parliament is overruled in these matters by the trade unions, the employers' organizations, the Boerenbond and the middle-class representatives, or in health policy by the medical associations and the mutual insurance companies. For large sectors of social welfare, and social-economic policy, corporatism is indeed fairly well developed in Belgium.

However, the cabinet or the ministers do play a considerable role in the initiation and direction of these negotiations and policies. From 1976 to 1985, for example, no general agreement could be achieved without the active participation and stimulation of the government. Via the cabinet enters the leadership of the political parties. And so the circle is closed. Parties and social organizations, related as they are by *verzuiling*, find themselves again *en famille et entre familles* as decision-makers. Political parties as the Volksunie, FDF, RW, Agalev and Ecolo, and certainly also the smaller ones, which do not have that kind of *zuil* structure and *de facto* relation to unions, cooperatives, and mutual insurance associations, thus find themselves outside the corporatist decision-making process.

5.3 Connections and consensus within the elite

The political system is intensively and structurally connected with the economic, social and cultural system in Belgian society. As such, the elites of these systems are themselves interconnected in working

relationships (Dewachter, 1982b). This coherence between elites is in turn fostered by their positions in the social stratum, their recruitment and their positions as decision-makers in society.

Almost 60 per cent of the Belgian elite is recruited from families already in that social stratum. As to the others, 27 per cent of the elite achieve their high positions through university education, with only 14 per cent really breaking through from below (Delruelle-Vosswinkel, 1972).[31] Prime Minister Achille Van Acker is a good, but rare, example of the latter: the son of a basket-weaver, and from a family of twelve children, he went to school only until the age of eleven. In addition, three other selection mechanisms are important: command of the French language, urban background and male sex (Delruelle-Vosswinkel, 1972). The power positions of the elite are located at quite a remove from rank-and-file citizens, and the means for the control and orientation of the elite by the citizenry are few, not extensive and not decisive (Dewachter, 1973; Huyse, 1969).

Furthermore, there also exists an elitist consensus, which explains many of the Belgian political developments, and which consists of a broad agreement among political leaders and among top elites of other important sectors in society, on several policy areas. A certain set of the values of this elitist consensus is accepted by almost all citizens, simply as a consequence of their intrinsic merit. But the consensus also comprises parts of a typical elitist ideology and thus implies a certain tutelage of the citizens. It embodies the essential self-conception of Belgian society. As such it relies on a solid socialization mechanism: the educational system, and particularly the university. Indeed, the great majority of the elite has a university education. As a feedback of past politics, values and norms are elaborated and enter in that consensus or contribute to changing it. As a result of the Royal Question and the schools war, the elite learned that conflict escalation tends to withdraw decision-making from it: first by narrowing the space of compromise; and second, by ruling out any acceptable system of conflict resolution once the escalation continues for a long time and surpasses a definite threshold of antagonism. So the conflict ends on and by the street. Consequently, pacification must be implemented long before the threshold is reached.

As a result of the permanent necessity of cabinet coalitions, as well as the rather high instability of cabinets, the political elite has learned to anticipate the demands and vetoes of other parties, which are eligible for cabinet participation but which remain temporarily in opposition. Since changing the coalition partners is relatively easy and does not

necessarily imply a change in policy, the costs of cabinet change are considerably reduced. As will be shown later, under certain conditions cabinets even accept some of the demands of the opposition.

Policy-making in Belgium is to a considerable extent a reactive process: innovative options are few and adaptation lies at the core of the policy output—not least as a result of the international dependence of the Belgian economy, the cultural duality and thus the melting-pot of two cultures, the small size of the country and its geo-political situation on the international scene. Belgian policy-making is also characterized by a considerable degree of incrementalism (Dierickx, 1978), in which past values continue to weigh upon present politics. Small-scale adaptation can do little other than reinforce the basic values incorporated in previous decisions. As the top political leadership is to a considerable extent coopted, a selection procedure based on the value system can be easily and effectively carried out. And finally, consociational politics require the preservation of a core of values and norms. Hence the development of an elitist consensus.

What are the main values and norms of this consensus? In the post-World War II period, the elitist consensus may be said to concern the constitutional role of the Crown, the functioning of the parliamentary system as institutional setting, the dominance of the political parties in the political system, the warranting of the philosophical pluralism, the classic liberal rights, the implementation of pacification, the central position of Brussels as a point of concentration and orientation of power, the dominance of the French language and culture (although far less than in the nineteenth century), the acceptance and defence of Western predominance in the world, European integration, and the five alleged objectives of the Welfare State: near-full employment, economic growth, internal and external monetary stability, and a relative redistribution of income, and the recognition of social stratification as functional for the society (Dewachter, 1972). It is of course true that the elitist consensus does not comprise all policy matters. Neither does it prevent all differences of opinion, or competitive or even conflictual behaviour at the level of the leading decision-makers (Moden and Sloover, 1980). New problems do arise, and old problems are put in new societal or economic contexts, or in a new context of international politics which calls for adjustments in policy. The dynamics of some leaders and their organizations, and the positions they hold or the shifts in power that take place, may have an impact on the direction of policy. But the policies, options and actions themselves occur within the framework of the elitist consensus. Following a general

agreement within the elite, the consensus may be even adapted or changed under the constraints of a considerably changed situation or under the pressure of a strong and persistent opposition. In the long run, the elitist consensus is adaptable. By the same token, however, such flexibility is more resistant than would be a truly conservative approach.

5.4 The effect of opposition

The policy output of the Belgian system does not only depend on cabinet participation; an opposition also can be effective. During the two legislative periods 1965–8 and 1968–71, the CVP-PSC was constantly a member of the government coalition; the BSP-PSB was a member of governmental coalition for four of the six years and the PVV-PLP for two of the six years. All the other parties remained in opposition during the whole period. Moreover, there were also non-elitist opposition parties at that time. The parliamentary strength in 1965–71 clearly unequal per party, correlated highly with the duration of government participation of the various parties.

In that period, the CVP-PSC carried through 75 of its platform planks, the Socialists 76, and the Liberal Party 56.[32] Cabinet participation and strength in parliament for each of these parties was clearly divergent. Even the parties in opposition succeeded in getting manifesto proposals through: the Volksunie realized 31 of its proposals, the RW ten, the KPB-PCB seven and the FDF two, all fully accepted. Obviously, not all such planks are exclusive to one single party. But even when taking into account only the realization of exclusive planks, the realization score is 36 for the PVV-PLP, 32 for the BSP-PSB, 28 for the CVP-PSC, 18 for the Volksunie, eight for the Rassemblement Wallon, four for the Communists and one for the FDF. The degree of importance of the accepted proposals is on average almost the same for all parties. The score of acceptances stands in inverse relation to the duration of cabinet participation, with the opposition obtaining a high score (Dewachter, Lismont and Tegenbos, 1977).

These results run counter to the idea of a direct connection between the duration of government participation or the strength of the party in parliament, on the one hand, and the realization of its manifesto proposals, on the other. It is obvious that the level of acceptance of the government's pledges is more common than for those of the opposition. But it is also evident that the opposition parties, even if they are in permanent opposition, can push through an important part of their own platforms. Among the opposition parties, even such non-elitist

opposition parties as, for example, the Volksunie and Rassemblement Wallon, succeeded in this regard. These are striking results, particularly when we take into account that, in the period under examination, party strength, the duration of governmental participation and the elitist or non-elitist character of the parties, correlated positively.

The explanation bears on general and on specifically Belgian factors. In the first place, this surprising result has to do with a loss of distinction between government and opposition in a multiparty system. The multiparty system does not allow such a plain government–opposition institutionalization as is possible in a two-party system. Coalition partners at one time become opposition parties, and vice versa. In addition, the government, as well as the opposition, consists of different parties. The temporary coalition of parties in government finds itself confronted by a multitude of opposition parties, which are themselves not even allied in a temporary coalition. The party phenomenon thus cuts across the government–opposition scheme, instead of reinforcing it as it does in a two-party system.

In a multiparty system with coalition cabinets, the governmental parties do not have so many opportunities to push through their partisan policies as does a party in a one-party cabinet. Only rarely, if at all, can they push through programmes independently. Rather, they have to compromise with other parties and, as good strategists, they must keep open the possibility of *renversements des alliances* towards the parties temporarily in opposition. Such is the typical Belgian way of decision-making, constrained (except for 1944–7 and 1974–81) to the three traditional parties, carrying through a policy designed within the limits of the elitist consensus.

Excluded from the cabinet for a long period, as has been the Flemish nationalists in the inter-war period, the Volksunie since 1954, and later the FDF and RW, adopted in the short run the strategy of a *zweeppartij* (or 'whipping party'). Thus, the VU largely acted as a pressure party on the CVP, the FDF on the PLP, and the RW and PCB on the PSB. Such an efficient pressure-party strategy requires within the larger party an intra-party opposition or tendency that holds nearly similar views or which is going to defend similar claims. Thus, the VU would never have been so effective had there not been a strong tendency within the CVP which supported in their way the Flemish movement, while the RW could obtain some success with its strategy because of the presence of a strong federalist and leftist current in the Walloon wing of the PSB.

Study of implemented policies in the period 1965–71 clearly demonstrates that *zweeppartij* strategies make sense. But in the long run these

parties followed an anti-elitist opposition line; in essence they were the institutionalized instruments of a strong opposition movement.

Opposition is not confined to parliamentary parties. In Belgium when a traditional party is in opposition, so also is a whole segment of society: newspapers, unions, associations for mutual assistance, sometimes educational systems, pressure groups, local authorities, and so on. Indeed, such structural segmentation proves to be far more a platform for opposition and action than the party alone. In functional terms, the opposition party is the institionalized political arm of such opposition actions. It can also be the driving force. But as the opposition against the Egmontpact has shown, opposition does not necessarily need even that institutionalized arm. The Egmontpact of 1977, designed to pacify the ethno-cultural cleavage, which was agreed upon by all political parties including the Volksunie and the FDF (except for the Liberals who did not oppose it seriously), failed because of the fundamental opposition of the Flemish movement, which was carried through by actions of ad-hoc organizations and with the support of some influential Flemish newspapers.

This example illustrates the core of opposition, which is not so much a position or an organization, but an action that can start from three power bases: public opinion, action groups and the institutional setting. (In Belgian politics force is not accepted as a power base, nor used—until very recently—in a systematic way.) If the power bases are large enough and if action encompasses a sufficiently large number of people, a social movement develops. On that pattern the Socialist movement and the Flemish movement grew to become large and impressive movements, strongly opposing the main components of the elitist consensus. The time required by such opposition, its ups and downs in terms of achievements, and the differences by sector can best be illustrated by the gradual achievement of elite positions by Flemings since World War II (see Dewachter, 1981b: Fig 1). The achievements of the Labour movement are similar, as perhaps might be, if they last long enough and become strong enough, the feminist movement and the ecologist movement. In the same vein, such actions may lead to fundamental changes in the elite consensus.

An elite in a democracy cannot continue to ignore a strong political demand, since to do so may well pose a threat to governmental legitimacy and thereby, according to elite perceptions, to the regime itself (this argument was frequently invoked at the beginning of the 1960s and at the end of the 1970s). As such, the elite may change some elements of its consensus. Indeed, it may attempt to employ the classic

device of removing the anathema against non-elitist parties. Parties of opposition movements that are eventually accepted by the elite are obliged considerably to reduce their demands and to compromise with the elitist consensus. That is the price of their acceptance. But in the very long run they can also change the *état-gendarme* into a Welfare State and '*la Belgique sera latine ou ne sera pas*' of 1830 into a multi-lingual state on its way towards true federalism.

6. General conclusions

An unbiased examination of the changes in the Belgian party system over four decades, from 1944 to 1986, was the objective of this analysis. On the level of party competition, the party system proved to be considerably weakened. New parties came on the political scene, reducing proportionally the electoral and parliamentary strength of the traditional parties. These parties, dramatically, could not help splitting along ethno-linguistic line, thus doubling the number of parties to cope with in the forming and functioning of cabinets. Even the anathema of unfittedness for government participation put on the federalist parties had to be lifted for several years (1974–81), as was done for the Communists between 1944 and 1947, in that other marked period of cabinet instability. Such considerable weakening of parties denies the overall thesis, slogan or reproach of *particratie*.

However, the weakening of the political parties, primarily the traditional ones, at the level of party competition has been substantially countered, on the one hand, by a growth in the impact of the parties in government (namely, by controlling the elaboration, the maintaining and the dissolution of the cabinets), and, on the other hand, by a growing impact on decision-making of cabinet participation as such, by the politicization of the civil service and by the effectiveness of the ministerial *kabinet*. As Section 2 shows, the electorate proved to be a weak political actor while, from the analysis of the political parties at the organizational level, it can be seen that the persistent leaders of the parties have improved organizational devices at their disposal. The political interwovenness of the parties points to a considerable stabilization of the party system.

The extensive degree of *verzuiling* of Belgian society leads to special ties between the traditional parties and the social and economic organizations of their *zuil*. These groups supply organizational and ideological support, and to some extent leaders, members and votes, research, expertise, pressure and oppositional support. These groups

provide a crucial link for the parties in difficult times. Socio-economic organizations have to a large degree taken over decision-making in socio-economic policies. The Catholic Party, the Socialist Party and to a lesser extent the Liberal Party do not stand alone as parties but are part of a much more elaborate and stronger *zuil*, while stability in the Belgian party system depends largely on this structure. If parties in stable societies are not so vulnerable, then the three traditional Belgian political parties, by virtue of these connections, are all the more stable. A fundamental change in this system might well mean a change in the whole society.

Parties that do not have these ties, as the Flemish nationalists, the French and Walloon regionalists, the Communist Party, and the Ecologists are therefore substantially less powerful and much more vulnerable. Their power is even less significant since they confront some of the values of the elitist consensus. The federalist parties developed as real opposition parties and became sufficiently strong, so that the elite was obliged to take them at last into account. From 1974 to 1981, a compromise between the elite and the oppositional stands of these federalist parties was established. This compromise with the elitist consensus meant a considerable reduction of their demands and to some degree a cooling down of the ethno-cultural tensions in the state.

This adaptability towards and of the elitist values, the elitist consensus itself, the apathy of the citizens, and the stability of the parties and the societal structure through which the traditional parties are integrated in the *zuilen*, are the real corner-stones on which the stability of the Belgian political system rests. Indeed, the Belgian political system is much more stable than would at first seem to be the case.

But what about the political party in this rather stable system? The political party in Belgium is an important instrument in attaining power positions in the decision-making process: already in the phase of attention directing, still more in the phase of the design of alternative solutions, and crucial indeed in the phase of choice when issues are at stake. However, the political party is predominantly an instrument, not in the hands of the electorate, members or militants but of the political leadership, which is itself at the core of the Belgian elite.

Immediately after World War II Belgian political parties had to be rebuilt. They were rebuilt along the old ideological lines, albeit with new organizational machinery: lessons were drawn from past experience. Very shortly afterwards they had to demonstrate their utility in

conflict escalation and pacification. They proved to be good instruments. All the changes we have examined here do not fundamentally affect this characteristic. The Belgian political system is a *particratie* in the sense that the political party is the first and most effective instrument of the leading political elite for power achievement and decision-making.

Notes

1. *De Nieuwe*, 22 December 1978, p. 8.
2. M. Gregoire, *Le Soir* 24 February 1965, 24 March 1965, 7 April 1965; L. Claes, *De Standaard* 7 September 1977; M. Grammens, *De Nieuwe* 12 May 1978; P. Vermeylen, *Le Peuple* 19 September 1978; C. Rebuffat, *Le Soir* 13 December 1978; K. Van Isacker, Foreword in Raskin (1980: 5); R. Derine, *De Nieuwe* 1 September 1978; R. Liefooghe, *Kenmerk*, no. 14, May 1980; K. Van Miert, *Vooruit*, 16 September 1978; H. Schiltz, *De Standaard* 1 February 1978; F. Perin, at his resignation in parliament 26 March 1980.
3. See the declarations of 2 February, 6 March, 12 April 1939: 'Today, notwithstanding the Constitution has not been changed, the executive and legislative power ceased to be distinct. In fact, it belongs to the political parties of which the ministers were merely the delegates in the last legislatures' (12 April 1939) (Luykx, 1973: 366–70). A tendency to reintroduce *Orléanisme* was not absent from these declarations.
4. The so-called 'quorum' is a selective drag with rather limited effect. It does not slow down all small parties, only the ones with more generally spread voters instead of the ones strongly localized and perhaps with more limited support. See Dewachter (1967: 343–74).
5. Only two limited exceptions: the Poullet–Vandervelde cabinet from June 1925 to May 1926 and the weak first Pierlot cabinet in February 1939, which lasted only one week.
6. 'Opposition against the state', term from K. Kluxen, synonym of O. Kirchheimer's 'Opposition aus Prinzip' (opposition on principle).
7. It has to be mentioned that the KPB-PCB electorate was still large enough to win at least one seat in the House, but that the quorum requirement prevented the party from participation in the provincial distribution of seats.
8. The strength of the KPB-PCB declined clearly toward the end of the 1940s, but this was due to the international political situation.
9. As evident in the ability of the Flemish Socialists to make issues out of the installation of tactical missiles, the politics of cooperation with Zaïre under Mobutu, and the increase in the defence budget in 1979–80.
10. Except for one small case: the radical French-speaking Liberal Party of Brussels in 1974.
11. Except for a short time from mid-November 1944 to mid-February 1945.

The Communist minister took the initiative: they used their resignation as a pressure against the disarmament of the resistance.

12. The monopoly of the state in broadcasting has very recently eroded somewhat.
13. Some exceptional cases such as the by-election of 1937 between Prime Minister Van Zeeland and the fascist leader Degrelle, or the campaign of the Royal Question excluded.
14. Regulation of Article 170 of the electoral code.
15. The absolute numbers seem to point to a bigger change: from 432,000 in 1950 to 664,661 in 1982. However, the electorate expanded in that period from 5,573,066 to 6,878,141, an increase of 1,305,075.
16. Communist Party: M. Liebman, 'Belgische Communistische Partij', in *Spectrum Encyclopedie* Utrecht, 1974; Figure for 1949, from Tannahil (1978: 249). The membership of the Communist Party in 1946 numbered 100,000 (Liebman and Van Doorselaer, 1981: 207). If both figures are reliable, this represents an obvious indicator of the considerable support for the party in the first years after the war as well as its abrupt decline already at the end of the 1940s.

    Socialist party: figure for 1950, Duverger (1957: 89); figures for 1961 and 1970 from *Administratief Verslag van de BSP 1971–1972*, Brussels, 1973, p. 79; figure for 1976 from *Administratief Congres BSP 1977; Verslag 1975–1976*, p. 265.

    Catholic Party: CRISP (1967: 55–6); figures for 1970 and later from Rowies (1977: 14, 34), checked by the CVP *Activiteitsverslag*; Dendermonde (1975: 23); figures for 1982 for the Flemish parties from Vanpol (1983) and for the French-speaking parties from Braekman (1983: 5).

    Agalev in February 1982: figure from *Bladgroen* (1982, no. 4).
17. The only figures available concern the CVP-PSC (CRISP, 1967: 55–6). In addition to the new membership opportunity two other political changes also came about in these years: the enfranchisement of women and the intensification of the Royal Affair—thus hampering the isolation of one factor which would allow an assessment of the effect of the new opportunity. In these years, membership of the CVP-PSC remained at 10 per cent of the number of party voters.
18. *Zeg*, no. 27, December 1975, pp. 34–5. These general characteristics are confirmed by the Dimarso poll of the members of the party after the elections of 1981. See also Vanpol (1985).
19. PSC, *Rapport des activités 1978 du Parti Social Chrétien*, s.l. (Brussels) s.d. (1979: 1–4). See also: Groupe de Sociologie Wallonne (1982: 4–9).
20. The figures the parties themselves publish are mostly incomplete and subject to some image-building.
21. From 1971 to 1974 the amount of the yearly subsidy came to 200,000 BF for each party group, which with an additional 12,000 BF per member, totalled per year about 7 million BF. See Jennar (1982).

22. See, for example, *Knack*, 28 November 1973; 20 October 1976; *Wij*, 19 April 1975; and Franssen and Martens (1984).
23. The one exception, the Brussels Liberals in 1974, is more a case of party secession than of rejecting the leadership.
24. Among the authors stating a considerable extension of the politicization are the former supervisor of recruitment in the public administration E. Poullet, the publicist L. Moulin, the former Secretary-General, J. Snoy et d'Oppuers, and the professors H. Van Hassel and L. Huyse. In his overview of *L'administration de la Belgique*, the former first counsellor of the King, A. Molitor, warns against too hasty a conclusion whereas he had previously backed the growth thesis (De Winter 1980a).
25. RIZIV, *Algemeen verslag, 4e Deel, B. Statistisch gedeelte*. s.l. (Brussels), 1980, pp. 6, 86.
26. Figures for 1946–1971 from unpublished research by J. Smits. After the elections of 1981 the CEPIC was deserted by almost all members. A new group within the party was formed as the Rassemblement du Centre (RDC).
27. There is still a lot of research to do, in order to assess the significance of this Commission properly.
28. The most important in the post-World War II period are the oration of Cardinal Van Roey on 26 October 1944 on the UDB; the oration of Cardinal Van Roey on 12 December 1948 on the schools policy of leftist cabinets; the pastoral letter of all Belgian bishops of 4 November 1949 on communism; a similar collective pastoral letter of 12 May 1950 on the elections; the pastoral letter of Cardinal Van Roey on the royal function; the declaration of the Belgian bishops of 9 February 1955 on the educational policy of minister Collard, a pastoral letter of Mgr Himmer of 7 February 1955, on political duty, the instructions of Cardinal Van Roey of 12 June 1957 on vote orientations, the pastoral letter of Mgr De Smedt of 22 May 1958 on the same subject; and a call of Cardinal Van Roey of 23 December 1960, against the strikes at that period (Van Isacker, 1969). A last act in that direction is the Declaration of the Belgian bishops on the location of the French-speaking University of Louvain of 13 May 1966. A lot of reactions showed that Flemish Catholics no longer accepted that kind of 'authoritarian tutelage' (although the bishops as the organizational power of the university had the right to decide).
29. An earlier inventory arrived even at almost 700 bodies, see Staatssecretariaat voor Hervorming der Instellingen (1977).
30. Illustrating the fluid character of these organs, the NCEE has not met since November 1976.
31. As N. Delruelle-Vosswinkel defined the elite rather generously, the figures in fact exaggerate social ascent.
32. The score is obtained by counting one point for a completely realized plank and a half point for a partially realized plank.

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